

Social mobilizations, politics and society in contemporary Kyrgyzstan

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as a thesis for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Politics
In November 2015

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Abstract

This dissertation is about social mobilizations in rural Kyrgyzstan from 2010-2015. Following a constructivist approach, I aim to answer a puzzling question in regard to multiple but rarely sustainable protests in this global periphery: *Under what conditions can provisional episodes of mobilization be transformed into sustained mobilization?* In particular, I consider Eric Hirsch's insight that the commitment of participants of mobilization to the cause is formed within collective instances, i.e. 'group processes', and I employ it in the Kyrgyzstani context of generalized distrust and discredited corrupt politics. I explore the conditions in which participants of episodes of mobilization create *trust* in organizers and into the cause of mobilization. I investigate these conditions in two case studies: one concerns a fragmented labour force at a state-owned gas and oil company in which, in the course of four years, workers succeeded to empower themselves as a collective actor within the group processes of collective learning and collective decision-making. The second tells a story about a fragmented rural community that goes against mining operations but sees the decline of an initially successful mobilization within group processes of monitoring. These findings point to the presence of a specific 'pre-condition' for any lasting mobilization: trust between organizers and participants of episodes of mobilization must be established in the process of *monitoring* the commitment to collective interests. With this insight I contribute to the literature on social movements and mobilizations that tends to take commitment and trust as pre-established resources. Furthermore, this work intervenes in the ongoing discussion on social change in the former Soviet Union. First, my observations of the difficult formation of protest groups lead, surprisingly, to the conclusion that the weak state produces a weak society. Second, due to the fragmented and localized nature of these mobilizations, social and political change in Kyrgyzstan is most likely to occur at the local level.

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Acknowledgements

I began my PhD in Exeter in January 2011. Since then it has been a long journey with its due 'ups and downs'. A few times I wanted to quit, but I am finally there. For this I would like to thank foremost my partner, Alexander Wolters, for his unconditional support, inspiration and wisdom. I could not complete this endeavor without my mother either, Tinatin Doolotkeldieva, who has been a source of courage and determination for me. My supervisor, John Heathershaw, played a significant role in my personal and professional developments. He encouraged me never to cease asking questions and not to be afraid to see beyond my 'Kyrgyzstani borders'. John and Julia Heathershaw also welcomed me in Exeter and smoothed my transiting experience from France. I am sincerely grateful to my second 'informal' supervisor, Marlène Laruelle, who has always had a strong belief in me. I would like to further thank David Montgomery, Gul Berna Ozcan, Madeleine Reeves, Medina Aitieva for their warm encouragements. I am also grateful to a number of people who stimulated my intellectual imagination: Eugene Huskey, Catherine Owen and Stephanie Ortmann for exciting lengthy discussions about post-soviet politics and state, Amanda Wooden and Irène Mestre – about the extractive sphere, Gulzat Botoeva – about social networks. I am so thankful to the general intellectual community whose books inspired me and helped becoming a researcher. Finally, I am grateful to my friends and

relatives, Nargiza, Bermet, Timur, Kamchy, Arstan, Aizada, Nicole, Lynn, Bakai and others for being with me through this challenging period of my life.

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CHAPTER I: PHENOMENON OF PROTEST MOVEMENTS IN KYRGYZSTAN

I. Protest Movements, Politics and Society in Contemporary Kyrgyzstan

Today, there are riots throughout the world, from workers' and peasants' riots in China to youth riots in England, from the astonishing tenacity of crowds under gunfire in Syria to the massive protests in Iran, from Palestinians demanding the unity of Fatah and Hamas to Chicano *sans-papiers* in the United States. There are all sorts of riots, often very violent, but sometimes barely hinted at, mobilizing either specific social groups or whole populations. They are prompted by governments' and/or employers' decisions, electoral controversies, the activities of the police or an occupying army, even by simple episodes in people's existence. They immediately take a militant turn or develop in the shadow of a more official protest. They are blindly progressive or blindly reactionary (not every riot is up for grabs...). What they all have in common is that they stir up masses of people on the theme that things as they are must be regarded as unacceptable.¹

Alain Badiou

¹ Badiou, A. (2012) *The rebirth of history. Times of riots and uprisings*, translated by Elliott, G., London, New York: Verso, p. 21.

When I began my doctoral research in 2011, the Kyrgyzstani arena of social mobilization was similar to that noted by Badiou above. With its two successful uprisings against the central regime and countless protest movements, the country represents a fascinating case study of social mobilization.

Social mobilization has become an enduring feature of politics for both the elite and the marginalized. Yet a fascinating aspect of the Kyrgyzstani protests has been their extensive yet also elusive nature. In my dissertation, I focus on social mobilizations instigated by social groups that operate within the ‘periphery’ rather than the epicentre of political life in the capital Bishkek.² In this chapter, I introduce the reader to an expansive field of social mobilizations in Kyrgyzstan and to my main theoretical and empirical problematic, i.e., *under what conditions can provisional episodes of mobilization be transformed into sustained mobilization*. I will first provide a quick overview of ‘revolutions’ and the ‘evolution’ of protests over the past ten years, which will lay the groundwork for discussing my case studies in the second place. Finally, I will present my research agenda and provide an outline of the dissertation.

1.1. ‘Revolutions’: March 2005 and April 2010

Kyrgyzstan’s early years of independence were fairly undisturbed³ (Cummings and Hinnebusch, 2011), in contrast to other parts of the Soviet Union, where independence movements emerged to contest Soviet rule and put in place

² Edward Shils, who is known for conceptualizing a comprehensive political model based on ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’ to explain the constitution of societies and states, viewed the centre as comprising three core aspects: values and beliefs, institutions and elites. Thus, the centre exercises various types of authority (economic, political, military and other) and disseminates values (religious, cultural and other) through institutions. The elite at the centre not only govern these institutions, but also contains the periphery. Although in the remaining part of the dissertation I refer to ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’ as a heuristic way to highlight the phenomenon of local grassroots mobilizations that operate against the centre, my analysis differs from Shil’s model. Shil viewed the periphery as an amorphous recipient of the values and beliefs of the centre. Contrary to this, I indicate the nature, albeit a non-coherent one, of local structures and processes of change at the periphery. Moreover, I also demonstrate that the centre has less integrative authority to ‘blend the differences’ from disparate corners of society, as stated in Shil’s model. See Shils, E. (1975) *Center and periphery: Essays in macrosociology*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

³ With the exception of ethnic pogroms among the Kyrgyz and the Uzbeks in southern Kyrgyzstan in 1990.

national governments (Beissinger, 2002). Contentious politics finally arose in 2002 with a local mobilization, which was later labelled as the 'Aksy events' (Radnitz, 2005). The Aksy events were crucial to the history of independent Kyrgyzstan, as they introduced new practices of popular contestation. Specifically, the Aksy events set in motion new dynamics of contestation to central politics from the periphery. In March 2005, 'peripheral' sites of resistance coalesced with elites at the centre to produce what became known as the 'Tulip Revolution' (Radnitz, 2010), which put an end to the rule of first Kyrgyzstani president Askar Akaev and his family (1991 to 2005).⁴ On 7 April, 2010 Kyrgyzstan experienced a second popular uprising with the subsequent overthrow of the Bakiev family's authoritarian regime. This time, the uprising against the central regime was much bloodier than the Tulip Revolution; more than 100 people were killed and more than 1000 were wounded by government troops.⁵ A change in government was once again instigated from the periphery when protesters first stormed state buildings in the small provincial town of Talas in Northern Kyrgyzstan on 6 April 2010 and the next day in the capital of Bishkek. Kurmanbek Bakiev's rule lasted five years only, from 2005 to 2010.

With few exceptions, these major political events have been analysed from the 'elite' perspective. Sally Cummings, for example, points out a large degree of fragmentation within the elite and views the unsuccessful attempts of both

⁴ With the advent of 'colour revolutions' in post-communist societies, it was popular to view social mobilizations as a product of the maturation of civil society. See, for example, Beissinger, M. R. (2007) 'Structure and example in modular political phenomena: The diffusion of Bulldozer/Rose/Orange/Tulip Revolutions', *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 5, no. 2, June, pp. 259-276; Valerie Bunce and Sharon Wolchik view Rose, Orange and Tulip revolutions as part of a global wave of democratic change and occurring as a process of international diffusion. See Bunce, V. J. and Wolchik V. L. (2011) *Defeating authoritarian leaders in post-communist countries*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011; Demes, P. and Forbrig, J. (ed.) (2007) *Reclaiming Democracy: Civil Society and Electoral Change in Central and Eastern Europe*, German Marshall Fund. See also Tucker, J. A. (2007) 'Enough! Electoral fraud, collective action problems, and post-communist coloured revolutions', *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 5, no. 3, September, pp. 537-553.

⁵ For a detailed chronology of events, see *Kyrgyzsky perevorot, Mart-April 2005* [The Kyrgyz overthrow, March-April 2005] (2005) Moscow: Evropa. See also Akaev's daughter's account of the Tulip Revolution, Akaeva, B. (2006) *Cvety zla: o tak nazyvaemoi "tulpanovoi revoliucii" v Kyrgyzstane* [Flowers of evil: About the so-called 'tulip revolution' in Kyrgyzstan], Moscow: International relations.

presidents Akaev and Bakiev to control competing fractions as conducive to the Tulip and April Revolutions.⁶ Scott Radnitz makes a similar point: 'Akaev thus followed in the footsteps of other leaders whose policies inadvertently empowered critical actors in society who would later come to oppose or topple him.'⁷ Fairbanks continues in the same vein: '[The] "Tulip Revolution" only replaced one former communist apparatchik with a less sophisticated one, and the northern elite with a more parochial southern elite.'⁸ Eugene Husky writes about the competition between the government regime and the opposition in the run-up to the Tulip Revolution:

Set against [a] presidential 'family' desperate to maintain its power and perquisites is a growing opposition that is drawn not from the ranks of the permanently disillusioned, but from leading government officials. This contest between two irreconcilable forces sets up the possibility, although not the likelihood, of a 'yellow revolution in Kyrgyzstan'.⁹

Finally, it is worth noting an interesting suggestion by Henry Hale, who viewed political developments in the post-communist world not as a 'trajectory' or 'transition' from autocracy to democracy, but as a cyclical process that is characterized by elite contestation and consolidation phases. From this perspective, a regime change becomes a matter of fluctuations between these phases and may therefore occur anywhere where the necessary conditions for contestation have been united.¹⁰

Some exceptions to these regime and elite readings of events¹¹ include Radnitz'

⁶ Cummings, S. N. (2012) *Understanding Central Asia: Politics and contested transformations*, London and New York: Routledge, p. 73.

⁷ Radnitz, S. (2006) 'What really happened in Kyrgyzstan', *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 17, no. 2, pp. 132-146.

⁸ Fairbanks, D. (2007) 'Revolution reconsidered', *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 18, no. 1, pp. 42-57.

⁹ Huskey, E. (2004) 'National identity from scratch: Defining Kyrgyzstan's role in world affairs', in Fawn, R. (ed.) *Ideology and national identity in post-communist foreign policies*, London: Frank Cass.

¹⁰ Hale, H. E. (2005) 'Regime cycles. Democracy, autocracy and revolution in post-Soviet Eurasia', *World Politics*, vol. 58, no. 1, October, pp.133-156.

¹¹ Other scholars also proposed a 'foreign' intervention, directly or indirectly, in events and processes in the run-up to the Tulip Revolution. David Lewis has convincingly argued that the Tulip Revolution had been a product of the subtle convergence of domestic and international factors. See Lewis, D. (2008) 'The dynamics of regime change: domestic and international factors in the 'Tulip Revolution'', *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 27, nos. 3-4, September-December, pp. 265-

account of 'strong localism', Fuhrmann's explanation of 'social capital' and Temirkulov's 'patronage' concepts.¹² In addition to his 'elite-led mobilization' thesis, Radnitz (2005; 2010) also details how mobilization works on the ground, by situating rebellious communities within local social settings marked by strong norms and values. Radnitz claims that the economic dependence of communities on central patrons, as well as group pressure, create a distinct sense of localism and provide a mobilization infrastructure for elites. Azamat Temirkulov elaborates a comparable proposition for the Tulip Revolution by stressing that,

The basic methods used to attract supporters to mass mobilization were pre-existing informal, often traditional, institutions. These institutions attracted supporters by offering material and solidary incentives. They were run by patronage networks, which were pursuing their own material ends. Thus, different centres of mobilization emerged at the periphery.¹³

Using resource mobilization theory conceptualized in the US in 1970, Temirkulov puts forward a number of 'traditional institutions' such as *kurultay* (assembly), *aksakal* (elders) and *palvan* (wrestlers) as able to provide individuals with material and solidary incentives. Since they offer such incentives, local leaders and elites can employ these institutions for 'mass mobilization'. Similarly,

277. Boris Pétric stressed the partial responsibility of Western NGOs in provoking the Tulip Revolution. See Pétric, B-M. (2005) 'Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan or the birth of a globalized protectorate', *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 24, no. 3, pp. 319-332.

¹² National scholars have attempted to formulate alternative explanations. Akylbek Djumanaliev looks, for example, at macro socioeconomic structures and found that poverty and corruption were the main factors that led to popular uprisings against two regimes. See Djumanaliev, A. (2011) 'Revolutions in Kyrgyzstan: causes, goals and tasks', in *Aprelskaia narodnaia revoliutsia: uroki istorii i vzglyad v budushee Kyrgyzstana [April people's revolution: Lessons of history and a vision into the future of Kyrgyzstan]*, Bishkek: Biyiktik. David Gullette concurs with this vision when he suggests viewing economic inequalities as 'institutionalized instability'. See Gullette, D. (2010) 'Institutionalized instability: Factors leading to the April 2010 uprising in Kyrgyzstan', *Eurasian Review*, vol. 3, November, pp. 89-105. Osmon Togusakov is one of the few national academics of the Kyrgyzstani Soviet scientific generation that does not overlook micro dynamics in favour of macro explanations. He suggests, for instance, investigating micro developments within protest groups that gathered on the day of revolution at the Media Forum [one of the bases of opposition where the first marches against the regime began in April 2010]. See Togusakov, O. (2011) 'Will we learn from the March revolution of 2005?', in *Aprelskaia narodnaia revoliutsia: uroki istorii i vzglyad v budushee Kyrgyzstana [April people's revolution: Lessons of history and a vision into the future of Kyrgyzstan]*, Bishkek: Biyiktik. Unfortunately, the accounts by these national scholars are not based on extensive empirical findings and do not offer theoretical frameworks to advance a deeper knowledge of the phenomenon of social mobilizations in Kyrgyzstan.

¹³ Temirkulov, A. (2008) 'Informal actors and institutions in mobilization: the periphery in the 'Tulip Revolution'', *Central Asia Survey*, vol. 27, nos. 3-4, September-December, pp. 317-335.

Matthew Fuhmann attempts to explain the successful outcome of the Tulip Revolution with the help of Putnam's concept of social capital by noting the synergy between the,

Imported social capital and indigenous social capital [that] aided the revolution. Derived from these sources, social capital...lowered the transaction costs associated with human interaction, which enabled the Kyrgyz people to coordinate actions between the rural South, where the Tulip Revolution began, and the more urban North.¹⁴

Although Fuhmann's attempt to bring together the roles played by Western NGOs and indigenous 'community institutions' is an interesting approach for explaining the Kyrgyzstani revolution, the problem with Fuhmann (as well as with Radnitz and Temirkulov) is that he applies indigenous social capital as already possessing and providing trust for the purposes of mobilization. Such an unproblematic treatment of local institutions emanates from a widely accepted assumption that 'more often than not, traditional practices cultivate social networks, establish norms of reciprocity, and build interpersonal trust.'¹⁵

My view on the Kyrgyzstani periphery differs from the above accounts in terms of how I bring to the fore the highly contingent and less homogenous nature of local sites of resistance. To begin with, I highlight some of the conceptual problems with the elite-centred approach and the focus on informal institutions. By privileging the focus on elites' intentions and strategies, we inadvertently end up presenting any social mobilization as a result of someone's struggle for power. This focus suffers from 'scientific reductionism' (Sanghera, 2013) as it reduces the agency of ordinary participants to actors executing someone's strategies. This leads to a situation where much knowledge is produced on national elites and partially on local bosses but little is known about 'local actors' who are ordinary participants and/or observers of provincial social mobilizations. The approach also results implicitly in devaluation of socio-economic and other inequalities as a possible driver of mobilization; elite manipulations are not the

¹⁴ Fuhmann, M. (2006) 'A Tale of two social capitals: Revolutionary collective action in Kyrgyzstan', *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 53, no. 6, pp. 16-29.

¹⁵ Ibid.

only possible sources of resistance. Finally, these approaches do not take into account that Kyrgyzstan has transited from a closed regime based on informal politics towards a more open politics and thus towards more volatile and less Machiavellian outcomes. Whereas the discussed explanations do not leave room for random events, contingencies and provisional episodes that are part of a normal life in any society, and are especially an intrinsic part of conflicts. It seems to me that in a contemporary Kyrgyzstani society that is increasingly embedded in social media, Internet, TV shows and other intermediary means of observation and meaning-making, informal politics alone cannot decide the path of mobilization. Rumours and open discussions that shape opinions within compact settlements (open politics) play a significant role. Thus I challenge the assumption that the so-called 'traditional' society readily offers resources such as trust, solidarity and unconditional support to central patrons as a basis for the 'infrastructure of mobilization'.

1.2. 'Mitingy': evolution of protests

If one continues to explore the newly emerging contentious political arena of contemporary Kyrgyzstan, one finds an incredible diversity of 'smaller' events that nevertheless air political and societal voices. For example, shareholders in the Renton Group have been organizing pickets each year since 2003 demanding a return on their investments. In 2012, former employees of Kyrgyz Railroads staged a series of protests in front of Government House against unpaid wages and the organization's management. In October 2012, a group of approximately 100 individuals protested at Gorky Park in the capital, Bishkek, and later stormed several micro-credit companies from which they had borrowed credits that they were unable to return. In May 2013, a group of citizens protested in Bishkek against the 'expansion of Chinese citizens in Kyrgyzstan'. In the same month, another group of citizens with limited means organized a demonstration for 'equal access to education'. In spring 2015, representatives of NGOs and small political parties demonstrated in front of Parliament against changes in the constitution. As Andrea Schmitz and Alexander Wolters note, these protests

represented expressions of ‘genuine grievances’ that had been accumulated in the region for decades regarding neo-liberal reforms and corrupt politics.¹⁶ Moreover, these multiple small ‘initiative groups’ can be understood as elements of newly emerging leftist politics. Meanwhile, many other protests have been organized in support of individual politicians who have attempted to access official positions or who have sought to avoid state repression. Such protests by small groups with specific issues proliferated with each instance of the political system becoming more inclusive and open (first in 2005-2007, secondly from 2010-2015), and have become a permanent feature of politics in the aftermath of the second so-called ‘April Revolution’ as post-revolutionary authorities aspired to having more ‘protests but no revolutions’.¹⁷

Since the first major public mobilization in Aksy village in 2002, ‘*mitingy*’ or ‘*aktcii mitingov*’, which can be best translated from Russian as ‘protests’, have undergone significant transformations.¹⁸ Gradually abandoning the prevailing form of communication – appeals to notables – new forms and subjects of societal grievances have manifested in Kyrgyzstan. These new forms included campaigns in support of opposition, as well as publicly articulated programmes through associations, demonstrations, strikes, petitions and direct actions. The nature of grievances has also changed. During two authoritarian eras, *mitingy* were employed by social groups to channel ‘social’ concerns in areas such as the environment, resource extraction, labour and wages, amongst others; however, it can be stated that *mitingy* featured most prominently in terms of ‘political’ contestation, i.e., struggles for power. In the post-revolutionary period of 2010, *mitingy* became increasingly available to a large variety of social actors, who viewed protests as a means for communicating their grievances. This includes a diverse range of professional associations that includes petty traders,

¹⁶ Schmitz, A. and Wolters, A. (2012) ‘Political protest in Central Asia: Potentials and dynamics’, *SWP Research Paper*, no.7, Berlin.

¹⁷ ‘Almazbek Atambaev: ‘V Kyrgyzstane budut mitingi, no otnyne ne budet revoliucii’ [Almazbek Atambaev: in Kyrgyzstan there will be protests but no revolutions any more], *Kabar* (28 November 2012), <http://kabar.kg/politics/full/44860> [4 February 2014].

¹⁸ More on the usage of these terms can be found in Chapter 3, Part 2.

shareholders, miners, single mothers, credit borrowers, families, and others. Thus, *mitingy* have become a popular means for public communication of societal anger, discontent and disagreement. Using a large-n survey, Dilshod Achilov established a strong connection between social mobilizations and economic grievances, and noted that 'to an extent, solving problems through protesting has become an effective tool that has a higher chance of pay-off in the Kyrgyz Republic.'¹⁹

The emancipation of social actors led to the emergence and consolidation of specific cultural aspects of collective action. The radical Kyrgyz term '*Ketsin!*', which can be translated as 'Get out!', became widely used during mobilizations for designating disagreement against someone.²⁰ *Ketsin!* was, for example, employed against authoritarian presidents Askar Akaev and Kurmanbek Bakiev, as well as many other members of political, economic and foreign elites. *Ketsin!* is a radical albeit simple claim, as those who employ it do not see an intermediary solution to unjust situations but rather the complete exit of a wrongdoer. It is interesting to observe why the '*ketsinism*' phenomenon became popular in Kyrgyzstan compared to other possible frames of disagreement. It can be speculated that *Ketsin!*, as a protest frame, became dominant because the official channels and institutions designed for mediating conflicts had been scarce or not functioning properly. Hence, an exit scenario is one of the least costly solutions available to protesters that aspire to change or retain the *status quo*.

Yet even *ketsinism* became a rather ambivalent tool for local communities once politicians at the centre began using it to discredit one another. The 'last-exit' connotation, an attractive trait of the *Ketsin!* claim, is conveniently at hand in political struggles that are constantly in need of new extremist demands, when all

¹⁹ Achilov, D. (2015) 'When actions speak louder than words: Examining collective political protests in Central Asia', *Democratization*, 1-24. (doi:10.1080/13510347.2015.1012504).

²⁰ Of course, Kyrgyzstani protesters are not unique in producing the 'Get out!' claims. In many Russian cities, for example, single issue movements have produced similar claims towards city authorities. See Clément, K. (2008) 'New social movements in Russia: A challenge to the dominant model of power relationships?', *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, vol. 24, no.1, pp. 68-89.

others have become meaningless within the inflationary game of political accusation and discrediting. In general, politicians and would-be-politicians have been increasingly employing *mitingy* in making bargains with the incumbent regime. Such an instrumental use of protests gave rise to numerous smaller satellite organizations of 'professionalized' protesters known as '*torpedy*' (one's torpedoes), '*dejurnie aktivisty*' (activists on duty) and *OBON* (women's unit with a special mission). These groups are known for their violent occupation of state administrations and courts, the intimidation of peaceful demonstrators and civil servants, participation in elections in form of agitators and intimidators, as well as the organization of radical collective action such as blocking highways and the storming of state institutions. However, even these groups cannot uphold a monopoly on organized mobilizations, due to the increasing monetization of protests. Today, anyone can organize and participate in a protest with the aim of financial compensation.

These non-manipulated and manipulated mobilizations in the capital or vicinities usually confuse national, public and local audiences that observe them via television.²¹ Unable to differentiate between 'real' and 'fake' grievances, between 'societal' ('genuine') and 'political' (power-oriented or 'fake') protests, observers end up disbelieving and discarding them all together.²² A protest is then

²¹ For a detailed study of public opinion and political conflict in the period 2005-2007 see Wolters, A. (2015) *Die Politik der Peripherie. Protest und Öffentlichkeit in der Republik Kyrgyzstan*, Bielefeld: Transcript. On the other hand, the evolution of public opinion on various phenomena was possible through the development of mass media in the capital and other regions. See Svetlana Jacquesson's study of the evolution of public 'expertise' of genealogies, Jacquesson, S. (2012) 'From clan narratives to clan politics', *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 31, no. 3, pp. 277-292.

²² This distinction arose from my own attempts to evaluate people's perceptions of protest performances; I drew these perceptions from popular forums such as Diesel.kg and commentaries within primary news agencies like Akipress.kg, Kloop.kg, etc. Although the authenticity of protests has been featured in press reports, scholarly contributions on the topic remain scarce. In Kyrgyzstani national scholarship, Arzymatova is one of few authors who have attempted to describe the politics of discrediting and demobilization in these terms: 'The functioning of 'people's kurultay is a result of the constant [political] games and manipulation of people's opinion for the realization of private interests of competing groups'. See Arzymatova, A. (2011) 'Systemic patterns of March 2005 and April 2010 revolutions in Kyrgyzstan', in *Aprelskaia narodnaia revoliutsiia: uroki istorii i vzglyad v budushee Kyrgyzstana [April people's revolution: Lessons of history and a vision into the future of Kyrgyzstan]*, Bishkek: Biyiktik, p.15, 17. See also Dyatlenko, P. (2010) 'Kyrgyzstan: Protests on demand: Marginalised groups serve as rent-a-mob demonstrators whenever the country is convulsed by unrest', *Institute for War & Peace Reporting*,

perceived as 'a performance for the sake of performance' (*vystuplenie radi vystuplenia*) or a 'political game' (*saiasiy oyun*), stripped of its democratic power and potential for change. In addition to contentious politics, as national surveys demonstrate, citizens have distrusted state institutions, justice systems, political and other interest organizations in the post-independence decades.²³ Increasing awareness of arbitrary rules, the impunity of elites, unresponsiveness on the part of state institutions and the corruption of justice systems by the public discourages acts of disobedience. Against this generalized distrust and the demobilizing effects of the power system, 'authentic' protest groups find it difficult to be noticed, to distance themselves from other multiple 'noise-makers', gain public attention, attain committed followers, achieve their goals and expanding beyond a core group of believers.

For all of the above features, Kyrgyzstan stands out amid other post-Soviet states, where the effects of state repression are translated into more focused categories distinguishing between real and fake. In the rest of Central Asia, where protest movements exist, they are expressions of genuine opposition to the *status quo*, since social and political actors cannot afford to 'play games' with central authorities that do not involve 'real' things. Eric McGlinchey writes that 'grievances expressed during episodes of post-Soviet Central Asian violent protests are grievances that have long been present in these polities.'²⁴ In these countries, central governments employ harsh measures against any political and social dissent, thus sending a clear signal of what opposition, protest and societal grievances are. The few examples of dissent existing in this region can briefly illustrate these dynamics. In clashes between oil strikers and police in December 2011 in Zhanaozen, an industrial city in Western Kazakhstan, 17 people died and

RCA no. 626 (August 24), <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/kyrgyzstan-protests-demand> [02 October 2015].

²³ 'Uroven korrupcii. Uroven doveria naselenia institutam vlasti' [Level of corruption. Level of trust of the population towards power institutions] (2013) MVector: Bishkek. According to this survey, 65% of the Kyrgyzstani population distrusted the justice system, 57% of the Kyrgyzstani population distrusted police, 47% of the Kyrgyzstani population distrusted both central government and local administrations.

²⁴ McGlinchey, E. (2013) 'States of protest in Central Asia', *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo*, no. 299, September.

an additional 100 people were injured. This clash was a result of the seven-month mobilization of workers who demanded better wages and safer work conditions, and highlighted existing tensions between society and the neo-liberal state. In clashes between police and business entrepreneurs in May 2005 in Andijan, a city in Eastern Uzbekistan, 187 people were killed according to official statistics and ranging from 500 to 700 according to international organizations.²⁵ This bloodshed was indicative of a growing conflict between the state and society on issues regarding Islam. Clashes between law enforcement bodies, political opposition and the local population in July 2012 in Khorog, a Gorno-Badakhshan autonomous region of Southern Tajikistan, in which 30 militants were killed, can be viewed as renewed conflict over autonomy within a highly centralized state. In this part of the post-Soviet space, protests still symbolize a well-pronounced demarcation between state and society. In Kyrgyzstan, despite an obvious connection between poverty, social marginalization and political corruption on the one hand and protests on the other, social mobilizations have seen mixed results in terms of sending a clear message regarding societal anger and disagreement. In this context, the country is a particular place that needs to be further explained.

1.3. Case studies

The general developments discussed above shaped my initial fascination with Kyrgyzstani social mobilizations. The establishment of popular uprisings as the primary means of contesting existing orders (which became obvious via two revolutions) triggered my interest in the phenomenon of protest movements. I was intrigued by highly politicized individuals who became harsh critics of the ruling regime and who became involved in numerous local movements of resistance. From mid-2010, I began following their activism throughout a range of political clubs, associations and local anarchic groups that burgeoned during the immediate post-revolutionary period. In particular, the so-called 'revolutionary committees' (*revolutsialyk komitetter*) that have been active across the country

²⁵ For the critique of official version see Megoran, N. (2008) 'Framing Andijon, narrating the nation: Islam Karimov's account of the events of 13 May 2005', *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 27, no. 1, pp. 15-31.

since the first Tulip Revolution of 2005 caught my attention. These committees were part of the opposition led by parties like Ata-Meken, SDPK and Ak-Shumkar, and were active in almost all Kyrgyzstan's provinces. I was amazed to learn stories about such provincial committees that opposed the central regime within their respective vicinities. Thus, the popular uprisings against the Bakiev regime of 7 April 2010 would not have been possible without a local uprising in Talas Province one day earlier. It was captivating to hear members of these committees elaborate on their understandings of revolutions, of the state, politics and resistance. While travelling between the Talas, Osh and Jalal-Abad provinces in the summer and autumn of 2010, I was able to observe how members of these committees, some of whom had gained the status of national heroes, participated in the re-composition of local governments and councils. They were also influential during national elections in October 2010, since parties generally had weak anchoring in regions outside electoral cycles. Finally, members of revolutionary committees instigated protests on a wide range of topics not directly related to politics or the elections. For example, members of the committee I followed in Talas Province have been involved in mobilizations against foreign miners operating in the province, as well as against the central monopoly over the production of beans. In Jalal-Abad, members of the committee participated in protests against the low price of cotton, corruption and the privatization of a state owned gas and oil company, among others. In Osh province, the committee was active on a wide range of topics; however, the majority concerned nationalist politics as a result of preceding ethnic clashes in June 2010. Guided by their anti-regime discourses, I viewed these committees as local anarchic groups aspiring toward effecting major changes in their regions.

However, my enthusiasm about these local actors was soon replaced by confusion and even disappointment, as I increasingly became aware of other aspects concerning their political activism. Subsequent observation of local events involving members of committees showed that their participation in local politics, elections and protests was not meant to contest existing pre-

revolutionary authoritarian institutions or to suggest alternative politics, but to offer themselves up to cooptation by central actors. Their informal negotiations with central parties concerned the new distribution of resources and power in the regions. In exchange for appointments to local state assets and official positions, members were obliged to anchor party influences in the regions and secure votes during elections. Alternatively, they resorted to protests as another means of communication with central actors when negotiations were unsuccessful. In this light, these activists, who contributed to the instigation of the 2005 and 2010 revolutions, appeared to be no more than opportunist political entrepreneurs, who bargained for power while hiding behind progressive revolutionary discourses.

However, I had again been mistaken in my analysis. These local groups were not expressions of romanticized democratization or politics as usual. Not everyone was coopted and resistance was growing and taking on various forms. However, central politics, which became perceived in the two decades following independence as merely a struggle for power disguised by democratic discourses, set specific conditions for the formation of grassroots groups. Its pervasive demobilizing and discrediting effects were such that they fragmented collective action and hindered processes of association. In such an environment of political volatility and institutional uncertainty, it becomes difficult to sustain practices of resistance and contestation. This led to at least two resulting consequences: on the one hand, local actors mimicked central actors in the way they adopted the dominant form of politics, i.e., cooptation and corruption. It is, therefore, not surprising that local politics mirror to a great extent the features of central politics. Yet, local actors also adopt 'unconventional' means such as protests and violent actions. However, any collective action run a significant risk of falling apart before being consolidated as a result of the effects of uncertain central and local politics.

These different interpretations, which have shaped my research progression over time, left me with a confusing image of protest movements. How could I

understand the many protests that have emerged within Kyrgyzstan on a large variety of topics, but which appeared to be rapidly declining? Are these protests manifestations of resistance to and the contestation of existing orders, or yet another type of cooptation by means of blackmailing and threats of unrest? Also, what type of change do they bring about for politics and society if they are fragmented and rarely successfully sustained? Furthermore, how do protest movements function, given the precarious conditions that work against collective action? Finally, how could I conceptualize these protest movements analytically to make sense of what can be observed empirically within the country? The primary aim of this dissertation is, therefore, to understand the conditions under which provisional local episodes of mobilization transform or not into enduring social practices of resistance and contestation.

To study the conditions for the (non-) formation of sustained practices of resistance, I decided to include two examples of provincial mobilizations that I had observed during my preliminary fieldwork. I also deliberately opted for including one successful and one failed case of sustained mobilizations. This was pursued because unlike the successful example, the failed case fits best to demonstrate the exact stages and conditions accountable for the deconstruction of initial mobilization.

Since provincial economic assets served as the primary source for both local and central actors to plunder in the post-revolutionary period, and therefore served as a major factor of contention, my choice fell to protests within the extractive industry. Thus, in Talas Province, members of the committee were involved in the area of gold mining, whereas in Jalal-Abad Province, they were implicated in the gas and oil industry. In Talas, I chose an anti-mining protest movement that erupted within the small village of Aral the day after the April Revolution and that was carried out by farmers whose lands had been subjected to mining, and who were also members of the opposition. In Jalal-Abad, I selected a labour movement that emerged within the provincial town of Kochkor-Ata in the

aftermath of the April Revolution with the aim of protesting against privatization and corruption within the company employing them. I had to eliminate my case study in Osh Province, as members of the committee were active in nationalist and political movements there.²⁶

More should be said about the relevance of the chosen conflicts. Social conflicts in the extractive industry are presently understudied. Writing about various protest movements of the post-revolutionary period following 2005, Charles Buxton made an important remark, that is, that 'labour and land were mainly "unacknowledged" claims within the Kyrgyzstan revolution.'²⁷ It is surprising that social mobilizations within this sector have remained unexplored, since they represent an additional fascinating puzzle against the backdrop of a Soviet legacy and current socioeconomic stagnation in the country. Writing about the Kyrgyzstani post-independence economy, Gul Berna Ozcan summarizes it in the following terms:

When the USSR collapsed, Kyrgyzstan had a small but diverse industrial base consisting of machine tools (the production of machine parts, weaponry, electrical machines, hay bailers, regulatory instruments and gauges, electric lamps), mining (extraction of mercury and antimony, rare-earth elements, gold, coal and oil), electric power, the production of industrial materials, furniture and consumer goods (textiles, shoes, cotton textiles, etc.), as well as processed food products (meat and milk, bread, candy, alcoholic drinks). Agriculture was also diversified with products ranging from animal feed and commercial crops such as cotton, tobacco and sugar beets, grains and fruits. However, as the eminent Kyrgyz reformist Koichuev (2001) describes, the economy suffered the ills of the USSR pattern of economic development, with extensive exploitation of

²⁶ In this dissertation, I do not discuss other forms of social mobilization that do not hold political implications such as, for example, the safety nets that occupied a significant place in people's strategies for coping with the hardships of the post-independence period. See, for example, an extensive study on safety nets in the Kyrgyzstani Northern Province by Botoeva, G. (2014) 'Hashish as cash in a post-Soviet Kyrgyz village', *International Journal of Drug Policy*, vol. 25, no. 6, pp. 1227-1234. I also decided to omit from my analysis ethnic mobilizations that took place in the southern part of the country in 1990 and 2010, as they encompass separate scientific research. I do not include religious groups and movements, although these were considered by some scholars as powerful factors, to such an extent that they even envisaged the collapse of newly independent Central Asian states. See, for example, Carrère d'Encausse, H. (1990) *La gloire des nations, ou, la fin de l'empire soviétique*, Fayard: Édition.

²⁷ Buxton, C. (2011) *The Struggle for civil society in Central Asia. Crisis and transformation*, Kumarian Press: An Imprint of Stylus Publishing, p. 85.

resources and no emphasis of intensive development and technological advancement.²⁸

In addition, with a rapidly declining industry, old trade unions lost their previous influence and were unfit for mediating current labour conflicts. As Buxton notes: 'unofficial workers' action was an embarrassment to labor movement bureaucrats who had never led strikes in the Soviet period.'²⁹ At present, this legacy leads contentious workers to organize resistance outside of official unions or to create independent unions, which inevitably bears implications for modes of labour mobilizations and the problems related to the institutionalization of social divisions based on economic specialization.

On the other hand, the social fragmentation that followed neo-liberal reforms has had an immense impact on the ways in which individuals mount a collective resistance to modern resource extraction projects. Reflecting on problems of association in another Kyrgyzstani context, Ozcan observes,

There is almost no collective organization of entrepreneurs in Kyrgyzstan apart from a handful of associations promoted by donor agencies and the state. [Female entrepreneurs] who were involved in business associations prefer to use this affiliation for the promotion of their own individual interests, which leads to a common mistrust towards interest representation through collective action.³⁰

Finally, Zemfira Inogamova rightly notes that Kyrgyzstan's access to independence from the Soviet Union 'was a huge upheaval; [the] infrastructure crumbled and the fabric that had held society together for seventy years was transformed.'³¹ From this perspective, social mobilizations in post-Soviet rural Kyrgyzstan have the potential to provide us with fascinating research material

²⁸ Ozcan, G. B. (2006) 'Djamila's journey from kolkhoz to bazaar: Female entrepreneurs in Kyrgyzstan', in Welter, F., Smallbone, D. and Isakova, N. (ed.) *Enterprising women in transition economies*, Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., p. 96.

²⁹ Buxton, C. (2011), p. 88.

³⁰ Ozcan, G.B. (2006), p. 100.

³¹ Inogamova-Hanbury, Z. (2015) 'Resilience techniques: Spiritual practices and customary economics within farming communities in Amanbaev village, Kyrgyzstan', in Deane-Drummond, C., Bergmann, S. and Szerszynski, B. (ed.) *Technofutures, nature and the sacred: Transdisciplinary perspectives*, Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., p. 194.

and new directions for thinking about post-Soviet society and politics. As already noted by Balihar Sangera, Central Asia offers a fertile context for exploring 'the transformation from a planned Soviet economy into an uneven market society'.³² My examination of social dissent in extractive industry aspires to contribute to this area of literature.

By inductively developing a theoretical framework from empirical cases that apply to local episodes of mobilization, I aim to make two contributions with this dissertation. First, I challenge the structuralist approach of traditional social movement theory, which tends to focus on macro structures such as class, socioeconomic inequalities, state structure, political opportunity structure and access to institutions and resources, among others. Kyrgyzstani mobilizations defy such preconditions by emerging within 'unfriendly' environments, while straddling the threshold between development and decline. If such macro-structuralist approaches are adopted, Kyrgyzstani social mobilizations will be analysed as highly irregular and disjointed processes. Drawing on insights from the recent social construction of protests approach, I investigate the internal processes of local mobilizations to uncover the dynamics that have led some provisional episodes of mobilization to remain ephemeral expressions of resistance, while enabling others to develop into sustained mobilization. For social scientists studying collective action, my dissertation aims to contribute to theoretical debates on the role of internal dynamics, as well as the impact of social distrust on the trajectory of social movements.

Finally, the dissertation provides insight into contested politics in the post-revolutionary period in Kyrgyzstan. For those who are interested in Central Asia and post-communist states, I offer insight into the interplay of societal concerns and uncertain central politics on a subnational level and promote the view that the best way to learn about the power system is to observe it from a local

³² Sanghera, B. (2013) 'Theorising structure and agency and Central Asian scholarship', *Central Eurasia Studies Society Conference*, 5 October, University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA.

perspective. The argument here is that neither elite manipulation nor informal politics can counter fragmented state bureaucracy, highly contentious central politics and an uncertain institutional environment to such an extent that it promotes social mobilizations.

II. The Argument, Methodological Approach and Outline of the Dissertation

In light of the above puzzling picture of protest movements, my principal research question can be formulated as follows:

Under which conditions can local provisional episodes of mobilization be transformed into sustained mobilization?

Before addressing this question, it is perhaps worth noting the types of social mobilizations that I am dealing with in my dissertation. Throughout my dissertation I use such terms as protest movements, social (structured/sustained/fragmented/provisional/lasting) mobilizations, resistance, collective action and contentious politics. The Social Movement Theory (SMT) is incredibly expansive and proposes various definitions for these terms. I define 'local provisional mobilizations' as episodes of mobilizations that are unstructured or weakly structured and therefore do not last within time and space. 'Structured', 'sustained' or 'lasting' mobilization will be used interchangeably, because sustainability comes with structure. 'Resistance', 'provisional mobilization', 'collective action' and 'movement' all include the mobilization of individuals in one way or another. I have separated these into different stages of mobilization, as these stages require different degrees of mobilization structuration, movement being its highest degree of organizational sophistication.

Although the terms 'collective action' and 'mobilization' are widely used in a variety of settings, definitions of protest and social movements have posed problems for scholars of contentious politics in non-Western contexts. Authors

generally differentiate between ‘protest movements’ and ‘social movements’. Opp, for example, defines protests as the ‘joint (i.e., collective) action of individuals aimed at achieving their goal or goals by influencing decisions of a target.’³³ Opp’s definition of protest includes a diverse range of actions such as ‘violent protests and negotiations’. Karine Clément, a sociologist who studies Russian protests, proposes the following definition of social movements: ‘by social movements we mean every kind of collective action provided by any kind of networks which have a certain regularity, are sustained by some coordinating or organizational bodies and advance some general claims about social and political issues.’³⁴

Other more restrictive and wider definitions are also present, though it seems that the major difference between a protest and a social movement lies in the sustainability of practices of contestation. This criterion is difficult to meet in non-Western contexts, especially in cases where the state represses demonstrations and where expressions of social discontent are therefore provisional and spontaneous, i.e., less structured.³⁵ This has led some scholars to adopt a wider concept of ‘contentious politics’.³⁶ I will use Tarrow’s definition of contentious politics, which states that the latter ‘occurs when ordinary people, often in league with more influential citizens, join forces in confrontations with elites, authorities, and opponents.’³⁷ When these forces are sustained and ‘backed by dense social networks and galvanized by culturally resonant, action-oriented symbols, contentious politics leads to sustained interaction with opponents. The result is the social movement.’³⁸

³³ Opp, K-D. (2009) *Theories of political protest and social movements: A multidisciplinary introduction, critique, and synthesis*, London and New York: Routledge p. 38-39.

³⁴ Clément, K. (2008).

³⁵ Beinin, J. and Vairel, F. (2011) *Social movements, mobilization, and contestation in the Middle East and North Africa*, Stanford California: Stanford University Press.

³⁶ McAdam, D., Tarrow, S. and Tilly, Ch. (2001) *Dynamics of Contention*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Tilly, Ch. (2008) *Contentious performances*, Cambridge University Press: New York.

³⁷ Tarrow, S. (1994) *Power in movement: social movements, collective action and politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 2.

³⁸ Ibid.

2.1. Research agenda: the argument, variables, concepts and methodological choice

To study captivating examples of Kyrgyzstani fragmented and provisional mobilizations, I followed the so-called decentred 'social construction of protests' approach. Why do protests need to be constructed? I argue that in the Kyrgyzstani context, social grievances can no longer serve as straightforward indicators of the authenticity of protests although these grievances are genuine; otherwise they would not lead to initial episodes of mobilization. In the context of widespread corruption, generalized distrust and poverty, everyone has a grievance. Moreover, individual and collective concerns can be easily exploited for parochial interests. For this, political mobilizations have often been organized along state or elite channels. Therefore, the availability of social grievances *per se* (or their attractive 'framing') does not determine the emergence and development of movements, because individuals have learned to be suspicious of those who act on behalf of public interests and collective grievances.

Therefore, successful grassroots mobilizations do not only require appealing grievances but most importantly, a legitimate organization of mobilization, i.e. structure of trustworthy leaders and committed followers to begin with. Yet, leadership and membership do not originate in these qualities as given resources, but need to be constructed and maintained in time and space. It could be said then that at the initial stage, when a mobilization exists in its provisional and weakly structured form, leaders and members represent only the 'initiators of initial mobilization' on the one hand, and 'participants of initial mobilization' on the other. Only later, when initiators prove their commitment to *collective* interests and when participants are in return convinced that initiators are authentic and do not pursue personal benefits can the categories of leadership and membership be formed and sustained. This type of *trust* in the organization of mobilization is a

condition *sine qua non* for the sustainability of grassroots mobilizations in Kyrgyzstan.³⁹

With this brief problematization about how grassroots mobilizations work if they aspire for lasting existence in Kyrgyzstan, we come outright to the important point in the literature of construction of resources such as trust, commitment and solidarity. The traditional SMT that had initially been conceptualized in and for Western contexts approaches production of so-called 'cognitive' or 'cultural' resources as a necessary step for movements that are already *constituted* as a mechanism to maintain existing participants and to attract new members (McAdam, 1982; McCarthy and Zald, 1977). In the Kyrgyzstani context, I argue, the production of trust (*ishenich*) in the authenticity of the resistance's cause and organization is required even at the earlier stages. This process of the transformation of provisional episodes of mobilization into structured mobilization is precarious and faces multiple challenges; these stem from uncertain environments that invite individuals to adopt opportunistic behaviours within the process of mobilization.

Therefore, trust is required even at the stage of formation of a movement and not only at intermediate stages when a movement is already established and seeks to achieve its goals. I adopt Piotr Sztompka's conceptualization of trust that follows Gambetta's insight to specify that 'trust is particularly relevant in conditions of ignorance or uncertainty with respect to unknown or unknowable actions of others.'⁴⁰ For Sztompka, trust is 'a bet about the future contingent actions of others. In this account trust consists of two main components: beliefs and commitment.'⁴¹ It means that on the basis of certain expectations about others' actions in the future, individuals make bets when they decide to place trust into someone's actions. But betting is an active process because it involves

³⁹ Trust might not be required for 'manipulated' mobilizations that are organized either by state or elites and that has access to other resources to secure coherence within mobilizations.

⁴⁰ Gambetta, D. (1988) 'Can we trust trust?', in Gambetta, D. (ed.) *Trust: Making and Breaking Cooperative Relations*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, p. 218, in Sztompka, P. (1999) *Trust: A sociological theory*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 25.

⁴¹ Sztompka, P. (1999), p. 25.

one's commitment for the consequences such betting might entail in the future. Distrust is a 'negative bet'.⁴²

Furthermore, I adopt the social construction approach because it views cognitive and cultural resources as *created* within a dynamic process. I chose this approach because unlike a number of Central Asian scholars, I question whether the success of collective action can be *found* in 'pre-existing structures of mobilization' such as regional identities (Luong, 2002), kin and clan-based bonds (Ismailbekova, 2014; Collins, 2006) or patron-client networks (Radnitz, 2010). My contention is that in the context of generalized distrust and corruption, even these identities and structures are suspected of cooptation. I argue, therefore, that trust within emerging protest groups is constructed within the process of association and actual mobilization.

My approach to the processes of production of trust is analogous to Rick Fantasia's conceptualization of the formation of solidarity⁴³ and Eric Hirsch's conceptualization of the creation of increased commitment⁴⁴ as taking place within actual episodes of mobilization, as well as in group dynamics. Hirsch and Fantasia paid specific attention to actual episodes of mobilization and group processes as moments and sites in which movement participants are most likely to develop solidarity bonds, as well as belief in the success of collective action. We can, therefore, argue that episodes of association and group processes provide a space in which these resources are dynamically created and which consequently determine the course of social movements. Applied to Kyrgyzstani cases, episodes of mobilization and group processes provide a space for establishing trust. Specifically, this space creates conditions for the possibility of observation and monitoring over an extended period of time. In other words, conditions of *monitoring* allow the participants of initial mobilization to verify the

⁴² Ibid., p. 26.

⁴³ Fantasia, R. (1988) *Cultures of solidarity. Consciousness, action, and contemporary American workers*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

⁴⁴ Hirsch, E. (1990) 'Sacrifice for the cause: Group processes, recruitment, and commitment in a student social movement', *American Sociological Review*, vol. 55, no. 2, April, pp. 243-254.

organization of mobilization. In other words, to check out whether the initiators of mobilization are authentically committed to the cause, i.e., whether they represent collective interests. This function arose as a response on the part of individuals to widespread distrust of politics in general and protests in particular. The relatively small membership number where protests are concerned, despite the great number of protests themselves, is indicative of levels of trust (or lack thereof) outside of the core believers.

From the above preliminary problematization, it appears that two conditions shape opportunities for unstructured or weakly structured provisional mobilization to transform into structured mobilization: 1) **initiators of initial mobilization overcome generalized suspicion by proving their commitment to collective interests**; 2) **participants of initial mobilization establish trust in initiators and continue participating in subsequent mobilizations**. For this research, I also adopted an intervening variable – the existence of opportunist activists whom I call ‘brokers’ – whose effects magnify fragmentation of the organization of mobilization and therefore its authenticity.

The two conditions above consist on the one hand of the deliberation practices of initiators and the observation practices of potential members on the other. As already mentioned above, such reciprocal interactions between initiators and to-be-members are established through a variety of group processes, among which monitoring is the chief process. In the context of widespread distrust, only the monitoring process can provide individuals with the possibility of making repeated observations regarding the authenticity of organization and to make decisions about their participation within collective action. In other words, monitoring leads either to the production of trust or the intensification of suspicions and the further defection of individuals. Divergent outcomes of monitoring are accountable for various degrees of sustainability of mobilization, i.e., their degree of structuration. My research objective consists of exploring the two conditions in the upcoming empirical chapters and establishing causal relationships between their values

and the dependent variable, sustainability of initial mobilizations. I believe that examination of these conditions can deliver a useful contribution to social movement literature and specifically, to studies of fragmented social mobilizations that operate within weakly institutionalized societies and uncertain environments.

A few words need to be said about the methods that I adopted to set my research agenda. Since the onset of my research, I employed largely inductive and ethnographic approaches, the objective of which was avoiding the problems of not correctly applying theories of social movement and mobilization within a divergent case. My initial inquiry into the Kyrgyzstani phenomenon was inspired by general theories of social movements and mobilizations. As the study progressed, new empirical findings made me reconsider Western approaches to social insurgency. Therefore, my approach turned out to be circular and my main objective grew more ambitious, as my aim is to contribute both to a better understanding of political developments in post-Soviet Central Asia and to the literature on social mobilizations. The research aims to do this by developing new propositions regarding the appreciation of protest movements in the developing world. I also adopted a case-study methodology. Although such an approach suffers from several weaknesses, the case study is particularly strong in clarifying concepts, exploring causal complexity and generating theory. My case study methodology is 'hybrid' in nature, as I employ three formats: multiple within-case comparisons (or congruence procedure), controlled comparison and process tracing. In this way, I do not only compare observations across cases, but I also capture variations of the dependent variable over time within a specific case, and trace the cause-and-effect link that connects the independent variable and outcomes within smaller steps.

To address issues pertaining to 'micro' and 'macro' within my study, I also employ elements of the ethnographic approach. Within the chosen cases, the aim is to closely consider local arenas of contentious politics while observing their

operation against a background of large-scale socioeconomic and political structures. In practice, this meant that my research journey had to follow the actions of local actors that took them from their localities to the capital in order to explore central institutions, to look for political support and build alliances with other civic groups, before following them back again to their respective vicinities. For the purpose of this study, I conducted fieldtrips to the Kyrgyzstani provinces at different periods between 2010 and 2015. The research proceeded via interviews with activists and rank-and-file participants in two contentious sites. I collected 65 interviews and complemented them with additional data yielded from regular observation, available official documents and analysis of press reports.

2.2. Outline of the dissertation

In Chapter II, I introduce selected theoretical approaches that deal with the studied phenomenon. The literature on social movements and mobilizations is extensive; therefore, I chose directions that first contrast and subsequently help to address the problem of weak protest movements. Through this exercise of dissecting useful approaches, I divided existing literature into ‘structuralist’ and a ‘constructivist’ approaches. This division is somewhat heuristic, but it permits for clearly observing the development of social movement theory from a macro- to micro focus and from an emphasis on structures to an emphasis on processes. Thus, in the first (structuralist) part, I explore such theories as resource mobilization, political opportunity structure and political process. These approaches indicate the salience of organizational resources and external factors for the emergence and development of social movements. However, the reaction to external political circumstances and access to resources can only partially explain the trajectories that protest movements take. Therefore, in the second (constructivist) part, I turn to the frame alignment concept, which had been an early intellectual attempt at conceptualizing social mobilization as a *social construction* based on cognitive resources. Frame alignment is an important concept, because it demonstrates that movements are fragile constructions that are dependent on ongoing processes of meaning-making, the formation of valid

injustice frames, the creation of enemies and others. Yet frame alignment fails to conceptualize protest construction as a dynamic *action* and a *group* process. I, therefore, draw on the recent decentred approach, proposed by authors like Eric Hirsch and Rick Fantasia, who pay attention to episodes of mobilization and group processes as sites where the actual construction of collective action takes place.

In Chapter III, I transit from theory towards my own conceptualization of an explanatory framework. In doing so, I once again formulate my research problematic and clarify concepts that will help me to explore the values of conditions that shape the divergent outcomes for the dependent variable. I also explain my methodological approach and the logic that informed the selection of case studies. In order to understand the fragile consolidation of provisional mobilizations, I look at the following two conditions that I initially identified in my preliminary fieldwork: 1) initiators of initial mobilization overcome generalized suspicion and prove that they represent collective interests; 2) participants of initial mobilization establish trust in initiators and accept participating regularly in subsequent mobilizations. I also include an intervening variable, i.e., the existence of opportunist activists whom I call 'brokers', whose activities are detrimental to the integrity of social mobilizations. The future construction of grassroots mobilization is therefore dependent on the availability of repeated interactions, by which to-be-members can monitor the behaviour of initiators and initiators can demonstrate to a local audience their authenticity, i.e., their commitment to collective interests. Such reciprocal interactions between initiators and to-be-members are established through a variety of group processes, in which monitoring is the chief process. In the context of widespread distrust, only monitoring process can provide individuals the opportunity to make repeated observations regarding the authenticity of initiators and making informed decisions about their participation in subsequent mobilizations. If trust in initiators has been established, in addition to trust maintenance via continuous monitoring, other group processes such as collective learning, collective decision-making and

collective empowerment can emerge and enhance the odds of sustainability. Such a conceptualization of sustainability of mobilizations clearly categorizes my analysis as one centred on micro dynamics and processes that are inherent to the existence of movements.

The outline presenting the methodology and conceptual tools for this research prepares a good basis for the empirical analysis. Starting from Chapter IV, I delve into the empirical nature of protest movements. The chapter presents my first case study, which is devoted to a labour-based movement that took root in a state owned oil and gas company located in the small provincial town of Kochkor-Ata, in Southern Kyrgyzstan. I relate the events regarding rebellious workers who seized momentum to oust their corrupt director on the day following the April Revolution in 2010. However, they did not imagine that the takeover of management would set up new competition for resources among central elites and thereby provide new impetus for the continuation of the workers' movement. From then on, the 'Movement for Truth' took new shape to include new claims not only against corrupt elites, but also against 'unresponsive' state institutions and 'arbitrary' justice system. To effect these changes, workers doggedly staged protests in their province and in the capital Bishkek, and engaged in informal lobbying and court litigations. At home, trust in leaders and the belief in success of the movement was cultivated via group processes such as monitoring, collective decision-making, and self-empowerment. Resulting from this continuous engagement was a growing consolidation of an initially fragmented mobilization around a reformed Soviet trade union. In this empirical chapter, I explore the ways in which workers gained significant experience in protest-making and established sustainable practices of contestation over a five-year period.

Chapter V continues with social conflicts within the extractive industry and takes us this time to the field of gold mining. I explore in length anti-mining resistance, set in motion within Aral village in Northern Kyrgyzstan. In the immediate

aftermath of the April Revolution, a group of residents launched a process of public contestation against a foreign mining firm accused of environmental and human rights violations. These farmers, with an affiliation to the political opposition in the centre, claimed that mining operations had caused decreased harvests, the death of animal stock and divisions within the community. Using local mechanisms of consciousness-raising such as public gatherings, they attempted to persuade other residents to take part in the resistance. Sharing ecological grievances, hundreds of individuals attended public gatherings at the initial stage, but gradually developed distrust towards the organization of resistance. The failure to construct resistance led activists to change their tactics from public engagement to informal networks and from peaceful demonstrations to violent attacks against the company. The escalation of conflict brought about the fragmentation of social interactions within the village and caused complete demobilization. In this empirical chapter, I investigate the ways by which public scrutiny and monitoring exposed initiators' ambivalent agenda and consequently caused fragmentation of resistance.

Having presented this rich empirical data, I proceed, in Chapter VI to an interpretation of observations that I did not manage to include fully in the empirical chapters. Here, I return to my initial theoretical propositions and reflect on the values of independent variables and different manifestations of the dependent variable from a comparative perspective. First, I highlight that trust in initiators of contestation was established in one case but not the other, despite the availability of repeated interactions in both cases. In contrast to workers who granted confidence in their initiators of mobilization, residents of Aral village discovered the non-authenticity of initiators and declined to further participate in contestations against the mining firm. Second, I note that opportunist activists were present in both cases and that their activities distorted collective action in a number of ways. Yet in contrast to Aral, in Kochkor-Ata, participants were able to detect and subsequently marginalize brokers' activities via the monitoring process. I therefore pause here to explore in detail the dynamics that occurred

within the monitoring process. To do so, I analyse dynamic 'sites' in which monitoring took place in Aral and Kochkor-Ata; these include village gatherings and episodes of collective action, respectively. I come to the conclusion that supported my initial propositions about the necessity of monitoring process for the production of trust, which is in return a condition *sine qua non* for lasting mobilization. Various outcomes that stem from the monitoring process were accountable for two divergent outcomes of sustainability: consolidation of the workers' movement in Kochkor-Ata on the one hand and the demobilization of anti-mining resistance in Aral on the other.

In the concluding Chapter VI, I summarize the trajectory of my intellectual endeavour and discuss my empirical, methodological and theoretical contributions to the two bodies of literature. I recap my contribution to the literature on social movements and mobilizations in three ways: by discussing the critical role of trust as a pre-condition for sustained open practices of contestation, the salience of group processes as a conceptual and methodological approach for analysing fragmented mobilizations in precarious conditions within the present, as well as the original concept of brokerage as problematization of the agency of collective action. Finally, I elaborate on my contribution to the existing conceptualizations of state, politics and society in Central Asia. I conclude the chapter by reflecting on the type of social and political change that such fragmented mobilizations might induce upon society.

CHAPTER II: THEORIES OF SOCIAL MOBILIZATIONS

The Kyrgyzstani phenomenon of insurgency is diverse and includes various actors ranging from political opposition and their regional networks, 'civil society' or NGOs, elites, bureaucracy and the decentred 'interest' groups comprising teachers, traders, parents, farmers, etc. The object of my study is the under-investigated 'local' sites of resistance that operate at the periphery against central politics. Specifically, I am interested in social mobilizations and protest movements within the extractive industry. According to the National Agency of Geology and Mineral Resources of Kyrgyzstan, there were approximately 40 cases of conflicts involving local communities in the extractive sector in 2012.⁴⁵ These social mobilizations occur far away from the attention of mass media and central authorities, but have become a currency where the Kyrgyzstani fringes are concerned.

The above-mentioned mobilizations and protest movements subvert many theoretical assumptions about social movements: they rise despite weak organizational resources, lack of public resonance, weak political support and an insignificant success record where collective action is concerned. Moreover, Kyrgyzstani protests attempt to effect change with only a small number of participants and do not particularly care about the lack of wider followers. It seems as if protests emerge relatively undisturbed in different locations, moments in time and for different causes. But how many of these protests manage to produce a lasting challenge to existing hierarchies and hegemonies? More importantly, how can the conditions pertaining to the emergence of protests secure sustained practices of resistance and contestation?

In order to explore these types of mobilizations, I draw in this chapter on the large body of literature on social movements and mobilizations. This literature can be

⁴⁵ *State Agency of Geology and Mineral Resources* (2013) [Online], Available: <http://www.geology.kg/mineral/data> [10 March 2013].

conceptually divided into two groups that are of particular interest for this dissertation. One group can be labelled 'structuralist' and include such theories as resource mobilization, political process and political opportunity structure. The second group follows the constructivist assumption and consists of such concepts as frame alignment processes, an action-oriented approach and group processes that highlight a decentred approach to collective identity. This categorization should be understood as part of my conceptual discussion of the literature; however, in reality, it is much more fluctuant since, as Della Porta and Diani point out, concepts overlap across these theories and are subject to change.⁴⁶

In the following, I will discuss, in order, each of these groups of literature. The procedure throughout this critical exercise of engagement with the existing research is to use selective theoretical ideas as a heuristic foundation for the formulation of my own conceptual proposition.

I. Structuralist Approach to Social Movements and Mobilizations

Most scholars of social movements and mobilizations have been to a degree perplexed by the question of *when* and *why* social insurgency erupts. The thinking in this direction has evolved from the irrational behaviour of aggrieved individuals to analyses of sociopolitical structures and the rational behaviour of individuals. In this part of the chapter, I will discuss three main bodies of literature that deal with these issues from a structuralist perspective. I will start with resource mobilization first.

1.1. Resource mobilization

Resource mobilization theory emerged primarily as a counter explanation to the overly irrational approach of the previous social psychology literature on

⁴⁶ Della Porta, D. and Diani, M. (1999) *Social movements: An introduction*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

collective behaviour.⁴⁷ The initiators of this theoretical approach, John McCarthy and Mayer Zald, shifted from the grievance explanation model and instead centred their vision of social movements' development on internal resources. This was an important move, which rendered social movements and their internal workings the subject of their own history. In their seminal 1977 publication, McCarthy and Zald set out the approach of their research, which aimed to examine 'the variety of resources that must be mobilized, the linkages of social movements to other groups, the dependence of movements upon external support for success, and the tactics used by authorities to control or incorporate movements'.⁴⁸

According to this model, social movements require the following items to sustain their activities: aggregation of resources (money and labour), minimal form of organization, followers and a system of rewards designed to motivate membership. All of these elements are aggregated within a 'supply and demand' model. Conceptualized in these terms, McCarthy and Zald's model differs from previous interpretations in several ways. Conscience (which in some cases, as authors have admitted, even supersedes emotional and ideological values) overtook grievances in terms of importance. Furthermore, social movements' chief tasks are now being concentrated on mobilizing supporters and maximizing the volume of resources. Finally, the social movement's relation to wider society is defined as a supply and demand relationship. These elements are amenable to a specific understanding of the role of social movements within society:

We view social movements as nothing more than *preference structures* directed towards social change [emphasis added].⁴⁹

It is clear that by assuming individuals as 'rational actors', resource mobilization

⁴⁷ I do not address in my thesis the social psychology school, due to the lack of space for doing so and its limited usefulness to my dissertation. This approach represents an overly deterministic view of social grievances, as well as actors' irrationality in joining social movements. See, for example, Le Bon, G. (2009) *Psychology of Crowds*, Sparkling Books edition: Sparkling Books.

⁴⁸ McCarthy, J. and Zald, M. (1977) 'Resource mobilization and social movements: A partial theory', *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 82, no. 6, May, pp. 1212-1241.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

theory puts forward the organization and the effectiveness it provides to social movements in pursuing their strategies and tactics. In a later version of their model, Zald and Useem push this point even further. They stress that the model rests on features of an advanced industrial society, in which 'rising personal incomes give individuals the discretionary funds to buy memberships in movement interest groups.'⁵⁰ In addition, the government, corporate businesses and large organizations discover one another in market relationships characterized by impersonal transactions.

Although resource mobilization theory was clearly a breakthrough in the social movement literature, it poses a number of insurmountable problems. If movements were thought to have formed once they mobilize a sufficient number of resources and members, what would be the threshold that accounts for the variation in successes across cases? Why is a certain amount of resources accountable for the emergence and maintenance of social mobilizations in one context but not another? Far from answering this question, the model assumes the sort of environment that conflict groups rarely have. Even among specialists researching American social movements there is an argument that resource mobilization theory applies to the later stage of contention in which organizations 'have been accepted as regular participants in the political system.'⁵¹ Lo stresses that McCarthy and Zald's model does not deliver justice to 'challengers' who need substantial personal commitments from a limited group for a specific conflict' in order to make a breakthrough into the polity.'⁵² In a similar vein, Schwartz and Paul, and Piven and Cloward also stressed in their research that resource mobilization theory fails to account for the distinctive politics of 'lower-

⁵⁰ Zald, M. and Useem, B. (1987) 'Movement and countermovement interaction: Mobilization, tactics and state involvement', in Zald, M. and McCarthy, J. (ed.) *Social movements in an organizational society*, New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books.

⁵¹ Lo, C. (1992) 'Communities of challengers in social movement theory', in Morris, A. and Mueller, C. (ed.) *Frontiers in social movement theory*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, p. 224.

⁵² Ibid.

stratum groups' compared to middle-class mobilizations.⁵³ The general criticism that arose against resource mobilization theory stresses that the privileged focus on organization and resources has led to the neglect of '[the] more expressive, spontaneous, and disruptive role of conflict and violence.'⁵⁴

Other authors have challenged the economistic perspective of resource mobilization theory. One such thread of criticism challenges authors' overemphasis on individuals' rationality when 'deciding' whether or not to join a movement. For Hirsch, resource mobilization theory omits the role of emotional, ideational and group commitment that is crucial for group processes:

Increased costs do not always result in decreased participation in the movement; protesters often respond to threats and repression by developing a greater willingness to ignore personal costs in favor of the collective struggle.⁵⁵

In her ethnographic exploration of Brazilian small farmers, Wolford rightly notes that the motivations for becoming a participant in a movement is a not a straightforward process and not a 'decision' at all. Wolford points out that moral economies of individual participation are embedded in complex historical, socioeconomic and cultural conditions that have real implications on movements' trajectories. Her criticism of rational theory is insightful:

A vision of movements as 'things' with observable, quantifiable characteristics: numbers of members, demonstrations, opposition rallies, and so on. But movements are more than just visible entities or structures; they are – perhaps more importantly – a set of discourses, or narratives, ways of talking about justice and injustice, ways of imagining change.⁵⁶

⁵³ See Schwartz, M. and Paul, Sh. (1992) 'Resource mobilization versus the mobilization of people: Why consensus movements cannot be instruments of social change', in Morris, A. and Mueller, C. (ed.) *Frontiers in social movement theory*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press; Piven, F. and Cloward, R. (1992) 'Normalizing collective protest', in Morris, A. and Mueller, C. (ed.) *Frontiers in social movement theory*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

⁵⁴ Morris, A. and Mueller, C. (ed.) (1992) *Frontiers in social movement theory*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, p. 17.

⁵⁵ Hirsch, E. (1990).

⁵⁶ Wolford, W. (2010) *This land is ours now: Social mobilization and the meanings of land in Brazil*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

In terms of my own research agenda, I share the concerns of those scholars who explore the dynamics of social mobilization in non-Western contexts or in non-middle class societies. In my case studies, I am interested in the type of sustainability of fragile mobilizations that cannot be explained by resource mobilization theory only. The Kyrgyzstani protest movements struggle to sustain their autonomy, to not be assimilated by central political games or being discredited by suspicious public opinion. Yet McCarthy and Zald's model can be useful to account for the later stages of mobilization, where Kyrgyzstani protest movements have succeeded in establishing some sort of sustainable structure. Here, the model can, for example, provide some answers to the success of a resource rich labour movement in one of my case studies, in contrast to a resource poor community-based resistance in the second case study. However, the model is not a good fit for attempts to understand the early stages of mobilization in which protest movements emerge and attempt to sustain their activities against existing precarious conditions. The idea behind including resource mobilization theory in my literature review was to pursue the research objective of highlighting the gap between the Kyrgyzstani and Western settings in which grassroots movements operate and therefore, the need for concepts that can better reflect movements' efforts to construct sustained practices of contestation within a precarious environment.

1.2. Political opportunity structure

Another way to consider social movements and mobilizations was initiated by scholars who were interested in the external environment and specifically, in *political* conditions for explaining social insurgency. One of the leading authors in this area is Sidney Tarrow, who notes:

The outbreaks of collective action cannot be derived from the level of deprivation that people suffer or from the disorganization of their societies; for these preconditions are more constant than the movements they supposedly cause.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Tarrow, S. (1994), p. 81.

To indicate the limits of the relative deprivation theory in a comparative scale, Tarrow convincingly explains variations within labour insurgencies in France, America, Germany and Britain in the 1930s, despite the similarities of economic distress in these countries. In these cases, it was less workers' grievances or their access (or lack thereof) to resources, but rather the new political opportunities offered by the respective French Popular Front and the American New Deal that led to labour mobilizations.

To the previous deprivation explanation, Tarrow offers a new approach towards studying social insurgency, i.e., the political opportunity structure (POS). In Tarrow's research, this structure is a condition *sine qua non* for any social activism; thus, the formation of a movement is 'the product of people seizing and making opportunities.'⁵⁸ By political opportunity structure, Tarrow means 'consistent – but not necessarily formal or permanent – dimensions of the political environment that provide incentives for people to undertake collective action by affecting their expectations for success or failure.'⁵⁹ Tarrow lists four main changes in the opportunity structure that can provide such expectations: the opening up of access to participation, shifts in ruling alignments, the availability of influential allies and fractures within and among elites. He illustrates the role of electoral realignments for giving rise to political opportunities within the American Civil Rights Movement, or the role of increasing access to political action in accounting for protests of democratization in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in 1989. In addition to these major *changes* in opportunity structure, Tarrow also considers 'stable aspects' of opportunity structures such as state repression and facilitation.

Another adherent of the POS approach, Charles Tilly, explained various European mobilizations in the same vein. In their study of French violence after 1830, Snyder and Tilly come to a similar conclusion as Tarrow about the

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 85.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

dynamics of popular mobilizations. In their view, this participation was more likely due to electoral opportunities and changes within the regime and less related to grievances and deprivation.⁶⁰

Many scholars followed and nuanced Tarrow's innovation as a way to appreciate the importance of macro political changes, even for social actors who are assumed to operate from outside the 'polity'.⁶¹ This trend gave rise to an impressive scope of research, which the present chapter cannot possibly do justice.⁶² However, Tarrow's concept has also received major criticism. Although Tarrow acknowledges the non-linear relationship between POS and a rise in protests, he does not manage to escape, according to critics, structural bias, i.e., the structural determinism of essentially fluid situations. Goodwin and Jasper, the most vigorous critics of POS, convincingly argue that,

Such opportunities, when they are important, do not result from some invariant menu of factors, but from situationally specific combinations and sequences of political processes – none of which, in the abstract, had determinate consequences.⁶³

Kurzman makes another important point that specifically concerns the gap between scholars whose job is to detect and analyse opportunities and societies that are empirically affected by opportunities. In his interpretation of the Iranian revolution, Kurzman argues that there had been dramatic dissonance between political opportunities discerned by scholars and perceptions of political opportunities on the ground held by participants in the revolution. He notes,

These Tocquevillean analyses recognize that structural opportunities and perceived opportunities may not always match. The correlation between

⁶⁰ Snyder, D. and Tilly, Ch. (1972) 'Hardship and collective violence in France: 1830-1960', *American Sociological Review*, vol. 37, no. 5, October, pp. 520-532.

⁶¹ Tilly, Ch. (2008) *Contentious performances*, Cambridge University Press, New York.

⁶² See for example, Kriesi, H. (1994) 'Political opportunity structure', in Jenkins, C. and Klandermans B. (ed.) *The politics of social protest: Comparative perspectives on states and social movements*, London: UCL Press; Gamson, W. and Mayer, D. (1996) 'Framing political opportunity', in McAdam, D., McCarthy, J. and Zald, M. (ed.) *Comparative perspectives on social movements: Political opportunities, mobilizing structures, and cultural framing*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁶³ Goodwin, J. and Jasper, J. (1999) 'Caught in a winding, snarling vine: The structural bias of political process theory', *Sociological Forum*, vol. 14, no.1, March, pp. 27-54.

subjective perceptions and structural conditions may not hold true for some cases. Two possible mismatches occur when (1) people fail to perceive opportunities, or (2) they perceive opportunities where none exists.⁶⁴

Whether Kurzman's interpretation of the Iranian revolution represents a 'deviant' case or not, it seems to me that the point made by him challenges the POS in relation to whether the concept serves as an analytical tool or an analytical category. The conflation between the two becomes even more salient in the non-Western context, where non-existent public opinion polls cannot be used to test hypotheses about the popular perceptions of political opportunities. For example, in the context of Central Asian social mobilizations, the authoritarian regime of the Bakievs and political observers alike could hardly have predicted the popular uprisings of April 2010 that swept away the regime against the background of constricted opportunities for the opposition and civil activists. In non-democratic states, shifts in ruling alignments and changes within the elite occur secretly, and although they constitute important points of vulnerability for the regime they are not easily detectable to the to-be-insurgents. This was the case with the death of the Turkmen leader Saparmurat Niyazov in 2006 and the quiet succession to power of a previously unknown dentist, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov. In Uzbekistan, shifts among ruling elites are crucial for the stability of Karimov's regime; however, their nature is too opaque to be encoded by ordinary citizens and activists. Thus, the level of informality might hinder to a great extent the possibility for ordinary citizens to understand the availability of opportunities.⁶⁵

With regard to my case studies, I found the POS concept partially useful. On the one hand, it is clear that revolutionary changes at the centre served as powerful triggers for insurgency at the Kyrgyzstani periphery in March 2005 and April

⁶⁴ Kurzman, Ch. (1996) 'Structural opportunity and perceived opportunity in social-movement theory: The Iranian revolution of 1979', *American Sociological Review*, vol. 61, no.1, February, pp. 153-170.

⁶⁵ Other scholars of authoritarianism levied a different type of criticism against the POS conflict as necessarily reflecting the Western context. Rosefsky-Wickham, for example, charges that authoritarian empirical contexts are less about improving a movement's political opportunities and more about struggling against state repression. See Rosefsky-Wickham, C. (2002) *Mobilizing Islam: Religion, activism and political change in Egypt*, New York: Columbia University Press.

2010. Dissent groups reacted each time to the opening up of the political system in the capital in order to advance changes in their localities. On the other hand, POS cannot truly reflect further developments of the central political system or account for its subtle nuances such as, for example, depoliticizing and discrediting effects on grassroots mobilizations. Thus, POS is unable to fully explain why protest movements keep emerging and attempting to sustain their activities against the background of 'negative' political opportunities. I therefore continue the literature review with the objective of observing how the literature has evolved in reaction to criticism of the major existing concepts.

1.3. Political process theory

Political process theory, an innovative approach by American sociologist Doug McAdam, attempts to even up the shortcomings of the earlier POS concept. The theory offers scholars of social movements much more than a reformed POS, as it proposes an attempt to synthesize concepts that were elaborated on by earlier competing approaches. Thus, McAdam's political process represents a combination of several aspects of resource mobilization, new social movement theory and POS, which had previously been treated separately. According to the author, a movement's emergence is therefore accountable to the 'level of organization' that provides the means for taking action, the 'cognitive liberation' that serves as a transformation of consciousness and inspires individuals into taking action and finally the availability of 'political opportunities' that sets an external context in which movements can operate. This combination allows McAdam to conceptualize social movements as a *continuous process*,

Accordingly, any complete model of social insurgency should offer the researcher a framework for analysing the entire process of movement development rather than a particular phase of that same process.⁶⁶

McAdam also views social movements as an interactive process between protest groups and the larger environment that they seek to challenge. As such,

⁶⁶ McAdam, D. (1982) *Political process and the development of black insurgency 1930-1970*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, p. 36.

McAdam highlights the balance of both external and internal factors. In his opinion,

Neither environmental factors nor factors internal to the movement are sufficient to account for the generation and development of social insurgency... [instead] social movements are an ongoing product of the favorable interplay of both sets of factors.⁶⁷

McAdam's theory marks at least three differences between the political process and the POS concept. First, McAdam attempts to remedy the earlier overemphasis on external factors and seeks to balance out his analysis by looking for conditions of 'cognitive liberation' and organization within protest groups. Political opportunities are therefore only a part of broader social processes. Second, the political process also differs from POS in its historical approach of social change and appreciates the longer impact of sociopolitical structures over insurgent groups. As such, McAdam is likely similar to another above-mentioned structuralist scholar, Charles Tilly, who, for example, studied the evolution of the forms of collective action in correlation with historical state-building in Great Britain.⁶⁸ Third, McAdam's explanation of the movement's development as a 'response to an ongoing process of interaction between movement groups and the larger sociopolitical environment'⁶⁹ better highlights the interactive model that featured in Tarrow's concept as too instrumentalist. The point that social movements do not develop in isolation but in interaction with their environment renders the interactive model an innovative concept.

However, McAdam's list of factors has been judged as too structuralist. Despite the innovative focus on the interactive model and on internal processes, Goodwin and Jasper claimed that McAdam's theory fails to avoid the mistake of the previous POS concept, where the attention was centred on macro structures and

⁶⁷ Ibid., pp. 39-40.

⁶⁸ Tilly, Ch. (1978) *From mobilization to revolution*, New York: Random House.

⁶⁹ McAdam, D. (1982), p. 40.

in which ‘smaller’ events were neglected as insignificant for social movement generation.⁷⁰

To acknowledge the authors of POS and PPT, McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly recognized these criticisms and sought to address them in their recent work, *Dynamics of Contention*, a text that breaks away from ‘the static, individualistic, and often reified character of previous analyses – including our own.’⁷¹ *Dynamics of Contention* offers a new ‘relational’ perspective compared to older concepts. Thus, according to new perspectives, the concept of political opportunity structure was upgraded to become a set of ‘perceptions of opportunities and threats’. Tarrow’s earlier emphasis on rigid ‘mobilizing structures’ was replaced by episodes involving the ‘active appropriation of sites of mobilizations’, whereas ‘interpersonal networks’ – previously hinted at by McAdam – were given a central role in the dynamics of social mobilizations. McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly also privilege a dynamic construction of ideological frameworks over McAdam’s previous concept of ‘cognitive liberation’. In doing so, they conceptualize forms of collective action as ‘contentious performances’ against Tilly’s stable ‘repertoires of collective action’. In addition, collective action by social groups is considered to be part of politics, albeit non-conventional and non-institutional, which waves to a certain degree the dichotomy between state and society. As a result of the adoption of these innovations and revisions McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly come to a ‘processual’ and ‘relational’ understanding of contentious politics that represents a clear departure from older obsessions with the origins of social mobilizations.⁷²

Although *Dynamics of Contention* made a significant effort to decentralize research on social mobilizations, conventional literature still suffers from an important structuralist bias, whether it concerns the focus on organizations or large historical and sociopolitical structures. Instead of focusing on macro structures, I argue that conditions for the emergence and development of

⁷⁰ Goodwin, J. and Jasper, J. (1999).

⁷¹ McAdam, D., Tarrow, S. and Tilly, Ch. (2001), p. 73.

⁷² Ibid., p. 24.

protests can be found foremost in micro foundations of collective action. In addition to problematic levels of analysis, another challenge can be directed at the ontology of grassroots activism. My conceptual problem with political processes and contentious politics at this point concerns the exaggerated focus on the *generation* of social insurgency. The motivation for explaining the '*why*', which is so inherent in political science unfortunately leads to a serious omission of *contingency*, which is the essential characteristic of social insurgency. The titles of recent publications that seek to explicate the 'unexpected' uprisings in the Middle East (e.g., 'Why We Were Surprised (Again) by the Arab Spring') illustrate this trend.⁷³ Yet the very fact that such uprisings regularly occur in different parts of the world is likely indicative of the fact that social insurgency represents the flipside of mainstream politics. In a bid to list all the possible reasons for the emergence of insurgency, political science simply rules out the role of contingency and uncertainty that are part of this type of social and political activism.

II. Operational 'Tools' of the Structuralist Approach

Up until now, I have discussed the major tenets of the American school of social movements and mobilizations. From resource mobilization, political process and dynamics of contention, we have learned that social mobilizations are not linear manifestations of societal grievances and inequalities; rather, they are the products of complex interconnections between external influencing factors and internal capacities of mobilization. By focusing on their ontological foundations, however, I did not observe the ways in which these theories are practically being conducted. This omission will be remedied in this section, since the meso-level concepts will be useful in my own empirical analysis. I will first briefly discuss selected concepts with the goal of contrasting the basic assumptions behind this operationalization against preliminary knowledge of the Kyrgyzstani context.

⁷³ Goodwin, J. (2011) 'Why we were surprised (again) by the Arab Spring', *Swiss Political Science Review*, vol.17, no. 4, December, pp. 452-456; Gausse, G. (2011) 'Why Middle East studies missed the Arab Spring: The myth of authoritarian stability', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 81, July-August.

The analytical 'toolkit' of the aforementioned theories is naturally diverse. However, the way in which they unanimously emphasize the role of formal organizations, mobilizing structures, networks, leadership, membership and cultural and cognitive resources permits for treating this toolkit in a more or less unified fashion. As noted earlier, the focus of traditional social movement theory on agency and structure is conditioned by a distinct view that conceptualizes them as 'pre-conditions' for movement generation. The proliferation of concepts such as 'membership based on preexisting networks',⁷⁴ 'established structures of solidarity incentives',⁷⁵ 'existing cultural frames'⁷⁶ and 'facilitative leadership'⁷⁷ illustrate this purpose. Moreover, these agential and structural conditions are considered as an available 'infrastructure': 'both the failure of a new movement to take hold and the rapid spread of insurgent action [has] been credited [with] the presence or absence of such an infrastructure.'⁷⁸

For Oberschall, one of the authors of resource mobilization theories, organizational capacity plays a central role in social movement consolidation. Without advanced capacity, Oberschall argues, endogenous populations will not be able to produce beyond 'short-term, localized, ephemeral outbursts and movements of protest such as riots.'⁷⁹ Tarrow's definition of the organization of collective action is much more relaxed and includes a variety of forms ranging from 'temporary formations of challengers all the way to formal cells, branches and militias.'⁸⁰ He finds that the most efficient organizations are not hard structures or anarchism that shaped twentieth-century European social movements, but intermediate models found in nineteenth-century American civic movements that were based on 'semiformal and episodic organization rooted in

⁷⁴ Gerlach, L. and Hine, V. (1970) *People, power and change: Movements of social transformation*, Indianapolis and New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, p. 79.

⁷⁵ McAdam, D. (1982).

⁷⁶ Della Porta, D. and Diani, M. (1999).

⁷⁷ Barker, C., Johnson, A. and Lavalette, M. (2001) *Leadership and social movements*, Manchester University Press.

⁷⁸ McAdam, D. (1982), p. 46.

⁷⁹ Oberschall, A. (1973) *Social conflict and social movements*, Pearson Education Limited, p. 119.

⁸⁰ Tarrow, S. (1994), p. 135.

informal social networks.’⁸¹ Tarrow goes on to explain that ‘the most effective organization of collective action draws on social networks in which people normally live and work because their mutual trust and interdependence can easily be turned into solidarity.’⁸² McAdam follows this perspective and observes: ‘if there is anything approximating a consistent finding in the empirical literature, it is that movement participants are recruited along established lines of interaction.’⁸³ Similarly, Roger Gould, who explored the 1871 Paris commune, found ‘that the enlistment groups in the Paris National Guard were most effective when they were based on informal social ties rooted in...neighborhoods.’⁸⁴ Students of authoritarian contexts have extended the concept of mobilization structures to include other types such as work units⁸⁵ and student dormitories⁸⁶ in China.

Furthermore, networks have been explored from various angles: based on a wide range of informal social relationships (such as friendship, kin, neighbourhoods, activist, sub-cultures and affinity groups), as well as deriving from more formal settings (such as political parties, unions, professional associations, voluntary committees, churches, etc.). The network analysis appears particularly promising within the advent of information and communication technologies (ICT) such as Twitter and Facebook and their ambivalent role in Arab revolutions, but also in Occupy- and other movements.⁸⁷ A large number of scholars believe that it is

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid., p. 136.

⁸³ McAdam, D. (1982), p. 44.

⁸⁴ Gould, R. (1991) ‘Multiple networks and mobilization in the Paris Commune, 1871’, *American Sociological Review*, vol. 56, no. 6, December, pp. 716-729.

⁸⁵ Yongshun, C. (2002) ‘The resistance of Chinese laid-off workers in the reform period’, *The China Quarterly* vol. 170, June, pp. 327-44.

⁸⁶ Dingxin, Z. (1998) ‘Ecologies of social movements: Student mobilization during the 1989 prodemocracy movement in Beijing’, *American Journal of Sociology*, vol.103, no. 6, May, pp. 1493-1529.

⁸⁷ Tremayne, M. (2014) ‘Anatomy of protest in the digital era: A network analysis of twitter and Occupy Wall Street’, *Social Movement Studies: Journal of Social, Cultural and Political Protest*, vol. 13, no. 1, pp. 110-126; Gaby S. and Caren, N. (2012) ‘Occupy online: how cute old men and Malcolm X recruited 400,000 US users to OWS on Facebook’, *Social Movement Studies: Journal of Social, Cultural and Political Protest*, vol. 11, nos. 3-4, August, pp. 367-374.

through the mobilization of such networks that movements recruit members.⁸⁸ Network analysis has also been popular within Central Asian research. Some authors have explored informal clan networks⁸⁹ and patron-client networks in Central Asia.⁹⁰ Other Central Asian critics have, however, pointed out the ambiguity of clan-networks to serve as back-up units for social mobilization.⁹¹

Although a clear mobilizing structure based on specific networks or pre-existing identities is needed to maintain existing members and to attract new followers, many Kyrgyzstani protest movements suffer from a lack of such discernible structures. On the surface, they are based on some 'pre-existing' structures such as trade unions and regional identities on the one hand, and clan and kinship solidarities on the other. Yet, none of these mobilizing structures offer an unproblematic structure of incentives and motivations for joining the dissent. I therefore argue that the structuralist approach towards the 'infrastructure' of mobilization is wrong to take these resources for granted and as readily convertible into collective action. The Kyrgyzstani cases show that social mobilizations are constructed in the *process* of mobilization and that they hardly afford to rely on previously established relationships, networks, identities and other lines of interaction. Writing in the Middle East and North African contexts, Beinin rightly notes that, 'mobilizing structures were often considered to be pre-existing rather than dynamically created and appropriated.'⁹²

⁸⁸ Robinson, G. (2004) ' Hamas as social movement', in Wiktorowicz Q. (ed.) *Islamic activism: A social movement theory approach*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press; McCarthy, J. (1996) 'Constraints and opportunities in adopting, adapting and inventing', in McAdam, D., McCarthy, J. and Zald, M. (ed.) *Comparative perspectives on social movements: Political opportunities, mobilizing structures, and cultural framing*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁸⁹ Collins, K. (2006) *Clan politics and regime transition in Central Asia*, New York: Cambridge University Press; Schatz, E. (2004) *Modern clan politics: The power of 'blood' in Kazakhstan and beyond*, University of Washington Press.

⁹⁰ Radnitz, S. (2010) *Weapons of the wealthy: Predatory regimes and elite-led protests in Central Asia*, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.

⁹¹ See Megoran, N., Heathershaw, J., Doolotkeldieva, A., Reeves, M., Cummings S. and Radnitz, S. (2013) 'Author-critic forum: popular protest and regime change in Central Asia', *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 32, no. 1, pp. 85-94.

⁹² Beinin, J. and Vairel, F. (2011), pp. 5-6.

Another important element in analyses of social mobilizations is that of leadership. McAdam holds that 'to assert the importance of leaders or organizers in the generation of social insurgency requires not so much a particular theoretical orientation as common sense.'⁹³ Leaders are conceptualized as the official interface of movements, which are charged to convey a coherent image of an ideologically committed movement that aspires to carry out an alternative agenda for social change. These leaders have significant responsibilities for directing a movement, communicating its values to followers and wider communities, set a collective agenda, define strategies and tactics, and for managing intra-group relations. This has led some scholars to linking a group's leadership style to group cohesion. Harff and Gurr assume that strong leaders are able to cultivate a climate in which participants are inclined to relinquish their personal preferences for the sake of group cohesion.⁹⁴ Barker writes that 'leadership involves, however dimly, a vision of a transformed movement, a judgment of the present in terms of an aspired-to-future.'⁹⁵

These accounts end up depicting actors of contentious politics as organized within coherent unified entities in order to convey a perfect picture and gain followers outside of their core activists. Ideologically committed, ready to devote personal time and energy, they deliver their expertise and professionalism for the sake of public service. The notion of leadership became so unproblematic that citizens in the West rarely pay attention to the personalities of leaders of, for example, Greenpeace or PEGIDA movements. Instead, they join such movements because they share similar beliefs and values and rarely question leaders' commitment to the cause.

In Kyrgyzstan, leaders of protest movements are met with outmost suspicion. In recent times, individuals that claim to represent public interests have acquired a

⁹³ McAdam, D. (1982), p. 47.

⁹⁴ Harff, B. and Gurr, T. (2004) *Ethnic Conflict in World Politics*, 2nd edition, Boulder: Westview Press.

⁹⁵ Barker, C., Johnson, A. and Lavalette, M. (2001) *Leadership and social movements*, Manchester University Press, p. 11.

bad reputation of '*dejurnye activisty*' or 'activists on duty', a popular idiom that designates professional individuals who are hired in return for financial remuneration in order to organize protests.⁹⁶ Such paid and manipulated practices put into question the authenticity of collective action in the eyes of ordinary participants, opponents and the wider public. As a result, the ensuing distrust towards actors of contentious politics complicates the structuration of movements along clear leadership and membership lines. But how can we understand the ambiguous roles of leaders and the implications of this ambiguity on the course of social mobilizations? Leaders of Kyrgyzstani fragmented mobilizations rarely represent a guaranteed resource on which a contentious community can draw to keep its rank-and-file militancy.⁹⁷ As such, we can hypothesize about the contingent nature of the social climate inside movements and about the roles of individuals that do not remain unchanged once they become part of a movement.

Similarly, the traditional literature portrays membership in social mobilizations as a 'marketplace of ideas and decision-making', in which people decide to join and/or leave movements because they correspond (or do not) to their beliefs and interests. However, such treatment does not hold true in practise. Wolford's ethnographic observation is again very challenging,

Membership is a dynamic process, not a solid category or concrete group of people. The movement is a double-sided site of hegemonic contestation, with both internal and external points of contact, and the subaltern – the ostensible "subject" of resistance – represented by the movement is fluid and shifts frequently.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ See for example special reportages 'Professia protestuushy' [Protester profession], *Kloop* (11 January 2012), <http://kloop.kg/blog/2012/01/11/reportazh-iwpr-professiya-protestuyushhij/> [8 August 2015]; 'Professia – protestuushy – ili 'OBON otryad bab osobogo naznachenia' [Protester profession or 'OBON, division of women with special mission'], *Eurasian Union* (14 January 2012), http://rus.kg/news_rus/policy_rus/1525-reportazh-iwpr-professiya-protestuyuschiy.html [8 August 2015].

⁹⁷ Newly emerging studies of the Arab spring add to this criticism and even challenge the necessity of leadership as a pre-condition for action. See Durac, V. (2015) 'Social movements, protest movements and cross-ideological coalitions – the Arab uprisings re-appraised', *Democratization*, vol. 22, no. 2, March, pp. 239-258.

⁹⁸ Wolford, W. (2010), p. 12.

It seems that the structuralist approach towards leadership, mobilization structures, and membership as pre-existing unproblematic conditions shows little usefulness when it comes to non-institutionalized and volatile societies. The next part of the chapter will carry this preliminary problematization further by contrasting the structuralist literature against constructivist approaches. Both discussions will eventually prepare the basis for my own theoretical operationalization, which I present in the following chapter and further demonstrate in my empirical chapters.

III. Social Construction of Protests

I would like to stress once again that the major critique directed at the rational approaches is that the elements of social structure and culture are viewed as having the potential to translate directly into collective action. This part of the chapter argues that these resources have a rather *mediated* effect. New concepts have appeared whose main goal is to suggest that the potential of social movements to ‘take on’ these resources is not as straightforward as first assumed. Issues of meaning construction and structural inequality that shape actors’ ability to seize resources and opportunities in different ways have gained increasing attention within the ‘social constructivist’ perspective. This perspective, especially in its latest conception, offers the most suitable approaches for considering the conditions for sustainable practices within collective action, even in the contexts of weak formal organization and meagre resources. This part of the chapter will pay attention to the constructivist school of thought and address its early and recent approaches in order.

3.1. Early constructivist approach

The social constructivist approach rests on the premise that not all social problems become issues, despite being no less acute than situations that do become rallying points in the present. As such, the social constructivist approach is radically different from naturalistic and instrumental resource mobilization

theory and from early versions of the political opportunity approach, which conceived social mobilizations as direct reactions to 'objective' external events.

Authors like Snow and colleagues,⁹⁹ Melucci,¹⁰⁰ Kurzman,¹⁰¹ Hirsch,¹⁰² Fantasia¹⁰³ and others have put forward the idea that social mobilizations are constructed in the processes of making sense of ongoing events, of attempting to frame concerns and grievances within existing and new structures of belief, and that these processes are subjected to ongoing interpretation and internal dynamics that occur during collective action. Kurzman notes that 'social movements may be a particularly conducive site [for] privilege meaning-making, because their activities foreground resistance to the dominant norms and institutions of society.'¹⁰⁴

Snow and colleagues' critiques of earlier approaches capture best the departure of the social constructivist school from earlier premises. These authors identify three fundamental shortcomings in the existing literature. The first problem rightly concerns the conceptualization of grievance mobilization. According to Snow et al., previous frameworks neglected 'the process of grievance interpretations,' whereas 'what is at issue is not merely the presence or absence of grievances, but the manner in which grievances are interpreted, [as well as] the generation and diffusion of those interpretations.'¹⁰⁵ Social movement participants do not only take action in the world they seek to change, but 'frame' it according to their own worldviews. The second problem identified by Snow and colleagues is linked to the tendency of social movement literature to see participation in social

⁹⁹ Snow, D., Rochford, E., Steven, Jr., Worden, K. and Benford, R. (1986) 'Frame alignment processes, micromobilization, and movement participation', *American Sociological Review*, vol. 51, no. 4, August, pp. 464-481.

¹⁰⁰ Melucci, A. (1980) 'The new social movements: A theoretical approach', *Social Science Information*, vol. 19, no. 2, May, pp. 199-226.

¹⁰¹ Kurzman, Ch. (2008) 'Introduction: Meaning-making in social movements', *Anthropological Quarterly*, vol. 81, no. 1, winter, pp. 5-15.

¹⁰² Hirsch, E. (1990).

¹⁰³ Fantasia, R. (1988).

¹⁰⁴ Kurzman, Ch. (2008).

¹⁰⁵ Snow, D., Rochford, E., Steven, Jr., Worden, K. and Benford, R. (1986).

movements as a 'static dependent variable based in large measure on a single, time-bound, rational decision.'¹⁰⁶ Yet the volume and form of participation are contingent on changes that social movements undergo over time and across space and hence, are part of a dynamic process that requires proper conceptualization. The third weakness of the previous approaches concerns the failure to 'specify the extent to which various participation-related processes, such as bloc recruitment...network recruitment... [and the] mobilization of pre-existing preference structures...vary across social movements.'¹⁰⁷ This rich critique presents a good starting point from which we can discuss the innovations introduced by the social constructivist approach against these shortcomings. According to this trend, one particular theory of interest to my study is Snow et al.'s 'frame alignment'.

In 1986, Snow and colleagues published an article that offered an innovative approach for studying social movements. Drawing on Goffman's earlier works involving framing processes,¹⁰⁸ Snow et al. suggest that cultural processes, or what they call a 'frame alignment', mediate collective action. Frame alignment essentially signifies a process by which an individual's understanding of the world can be aligned to the SMOs interpretive frames. Several features characterize this process. First, since frames are constructed by SMOs, they are not directly based on a grievance structure. Second, in order to secure and maintain participation level high, frames fulfil a number of interrelated but not similar functions: frame bridging, frame amplification, frame extension and frame transformation. Third, the effect of frame alignment cannot be understood as a fixed achievement once and forever; frame alignment is an ongoing process that is subject to constant negotiation and adjustment among participants. All of these

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Goffman, E. (1974) *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*, New York: Harper & Row.

points on frame alignment render it in the eyes of Snow et al. a 'crucial aspect of adherent and constituent mobilization.'¹⁰⁹

The above detailed process of collective action framing relates to how social movements construct meaning. According to David Snow and Robert Benford, a frame is,

Interpretative schemata that simplifies and condenses the "world out there" by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of actions within one's present or past environment.¹¹⁰

Furthermore, Snow and Benford distinguish between diagnostic, prognostic and motivational functions of frame alignment. These frames can be employed in order to amplify, modify or transform the existing interpretative schemata.¹¹¹ In contrast to resource mobilization theory, movement leaders create these tools and their existence is not simply taken for granted. In addition, Snow et al.'s contribution is important in the way it stresses the temporality and contingency of these cultural resources. This means that frame alignment is never temporally fixed and its success depends on situational contexts. Della Porta and Diani stress the importance of the frame concept, as it 'allow[s] a phenomenon whose origins [had] previously [been] attributed to natural factors to be transformed into a social or political problem.'¹¹²

Although the frame alignment concept became popular among social movement scholars,¹¹³ it has also attracted significant criticism. German scholar Karl-Dieter Opp asks whether frame alignment necessarily leads to collective action and

¹⁰⁹ Snow, D., Rochford, E., Steven, Jr., Worden, K. and Benford, R. (1986).

¹¹⁰ Snow, D. and Benford, R. (1992) 'Master frames and cycles of protest', in Morris, A. and Mueller, C. (ed.) *Frontiers in social movement theory*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, p. 137.

¹¹¹ Snow, D., Rochford, E., Steven, Jr., Worden, K. and Benford, R. (1986).

¹¹² Della Porta, D. and Diani, M. (1999) *Social movements: An introduction*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, p. 69.

¹¹³ Noonan, among other scholars, distinguishes, for example, between frames according to ideological trends: a feminist frame, a master frame of the left and a working-class radical frame. See Noonan, R. (1995) 'Women against the state: Political opportunities a collective action frames in Chile's transition to democracy', *Sociological Forum*, vol. 10, no. 1, March, pp. 81-111.

conversely, whether collective action can happen spontaneously without any prior frame processes.¹¹⁴ Other scholars have challenged the model for its insensitivity towards contexts: the same collective action frame might be successful in building membership in one case, but fail to do so in another case without the model accounting for these variations.¹¹⁵ Although these critics have a valid point, I still find the frame alignment concept helpful for the design of the activities of protest movements' leaders, as well as for their efforts to present grievances and worries in culturally specific and valid frames. In the Kyrgyzstani context, both labour and rural 'activists' have resorted to frame alignment processes in order to attract the attention of fellow workers and rural residents, respectively, to previously unknown grievances. However, there are limits to the concept when it comes to the analysis of ordinary members of mobilization, because in my opinion, they are not merely recipients of frames but equal participants of frame construction. I will address this point in the final section of the chapter.

3.2. Recent decentered approach

The previously discussed constructivist literature explored the deliberate character of meaning-making and consciousness raising processes such as frame alignment and treated them as another resource designed to either attract new members or sustain old participants. Kurzman's critique made in the Introduction of the special issue on meaning-making in social movements is illustrative of the point,

While the cultural turn conquered social movement studies, some of its most radical implications were lost in the process. In effect, meaning-making has been turned into a set of independent variables. Does a group have a strong sense of solidarity? Check. Does the movement have a

¹¹⁴ Opp, K-D. (2009) *Theories of political protest and social movements: A multidisciplinary introduction, critique, and synthesis*, London and New York: Routledge, p. 258.

¹¹⁵ Koopmans, R. and Duyvendak, J. W. 'The political construction of the nuclear energy issue and its impact on the mobilization of anti-nuclear movements in Western Europe', *Social Problems*, vol. 42, no. 2, May, pp. 235-251; McVeigh, R., Mayers, D. J. and Sikkink, D. (2004) 'Corn, Klansmen, and Coolidge: Structure and framing in social movements', *Social Forces*, vol. 83, no. 2, December, pp. 653-690, found in Opp, K-D. (2009), p. 259.

message that resonates with core values? Check. This may be an exaggeration, but not by much.¹¹⁶

Taking into account this important caveat, recent literature has increasingly found that participation can form and change *in the process of action*, whether designed intentionally or not. Let us take a closer look at what the authors of this literature provide.

Already in earlier versions of the social constructivist approach, there was an understanding that 'consciousness raising during episodes of collective action affects primarily people engaged in a collective *action* [italics added].'¹¹⁷ Recent constructivist literature rendered the processes of meaning-making and construction of internal cultural resources even more action-oriented. Hirsch and Fantasia are authors that have made consciousness-raising during episodes of mobilization the core of their approaches to collective action. By detecting such episodes, they fill an important gap left by Snow and Benford's explanations of the functioning of different framings. As discussed earlier, Snow et al. identified and detailed diagnostic, prognostic and motivational framings, but omitted specifying the conditions under which their generation becomes possible. Hirsch and Fantasia explore first and foremost the *conditions* in which meanings are collectively produced and in which solidarities are bound.

Rick Fantasia is a well-known sociologist of the American working class. In his important study on contemporary labour mobilizations, he explores what has been assumed as absent solidarity among American workers. He suggests that cultures of solidarity are,

Neither ideas of solidarity in the abstract nor bureaucratic trade union activity, but cultural formations that arise in *conflict*, creating and sustaining solidarity in *opposition* to the dominant structure [emphases added].¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Kurzman, Ch. (2008).

¹¹⁷ Klandermans, B. (1992) 'The social construction of protest and multiorganizational fields', in Morris, A. and Mueller, C. (ed.) *Frontiers in social movement theory*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, p. 98.

¹¹⁸ Fantasia, R. (1988), p. 20.

He goes on to say that 'solidarity is created *and* expressed by the process of mutual association [*italics in original*].'¹¹⁹ Fantasia further highlights the 'often fragile, fragmentary and defensive character'¹²⁰ of expressions of solidarity. An upshot of this vision is a distinct research methodology. In order to study American rebel workers during the 1980s, Fantasia investigated sites of expressions of solidarity not in the traditional structures of the working class, but in activities in which solidarity is likely to emerge. Such potential activities can be found in the creation of unions, the maintenance of strike action and the preservation of rank-and-file militancy within unions.

The focus on the processes of association, which represents a much more challenging methodological task than the crediting of 'pre-existing' identities, is an important finding that has the potential to explain the eruption of 'unexpected' labour mobilizations in Kyrgyzstan, too. Presently, labour is considered a vanished collective actor, because following post-Soviet de-industrialization, the country turned primarily to agrarian production in the form of small and medium enterprises. If one concentrates only on these 'objective' factors, based on labour issues and labour identity, nothing will likely be able to predict the possibility for any large mobilizations to emerge. Moreover, if we were to search for 'hard' evidence of pre-existing labour solidarities such as, for example, workers' firm ideological commitment or independent unionism or again, a connection between rebellious workers and socialist parties, we will remain uninformed, since none of these evidences is explicitly observable in Kyrgyzstan. Similarly, in divided rural communities, the erosion of social bonds (if we assume that such bonds prevailed from the pre-Soviet and/or Soviet periods) due to neoliberal reforms¹²¹ will most likely undermine sustainable collective action. Rural populations have thus far been able to engage in bifurcated and brief forms of mobilizations only.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p. 11.

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 23.

¹²¹ See Botoeva, G. (2014); Satybaldieva, E. (2015) 'Political capital, everyday politics and moral obligations: Understanding the political strategies of various elites and the poor in Kyrgyzstan', *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 67, no. 3, May, pp. 370-387.

However, if one looks at these associations as *expressions* of solidarities, one can produce a better understanding of how even such *provisional* expressions successfully translate into punctual collective actions. These expressions should not be underestimated. Only if I approach the problem of precarious protest movements this way (instead of counting all the missing links that traditional mobilization assumes for a successful protest) can I ask what might actually appear as a result of such expressions and whether it can translate into something more lasting.

Another influential scholar in this area, Eric Hirsch, examines the power of association and notes convincingly that,

Even the most sophisticated rational choice models...cannot account for group solidarity in movement recruitment and commitment because they focus on the individual decision to participate and neglect the group processes which influence those decisions.¹²²

Rejecting both the rational choice and social disorganization explanations, Hirsch focuses instead on the social creation of commitment, which is in line with the earlier constructivist approach. However, Hirsch differs from the previous literature in important ways; he places activists and ordinary participants within *group* dynamics, in which each voice is crucial for determining individual and, consequently, collective commitment. In contrast to this, the previous framework analysis cantered on how frame alignment affected participation, thus making participants, albeit critical, mere recipients of meaning rather than architects of their individual and group commitment.

In his study of Columbia University student mobilizations, Hirsch identifies four such group dynamics that motivate individuals to align with a collective cause: consciousness-raising, collective empowerment, polarization and group decision-making. By using an ethnographic methodology, he observed and surveyed students who took participation in demonstrations against the personal risk they

¹²² Hirsch, E. (1990).

took of being expelled from the university. Hirsch's observations led him to suggest that potential members were likely to join protests if they developed an 'ideological commitment' to the group cause and believed that protests were efficient for achieving the group's goals. Ideological commitment and beliefs were nurtured in a series of different group processes. For example, group discussions that were intentionally left open to everyone were conducive to consciousness-raising. The author notes that consciousness-raising was, however, a challenging task, since it necessarily involves the questioning of existing authority relationships. However, group discussions provided a bridge between individuals who had not previously been exposed to the ideas of others.

Another group process, collective empowerment, is a group dynamic in which participants have an opportunity to test the 'real' commitment of others by checking at actual protest sites 'how many are willing to take the risks associated with challenging authority.'¹²³ Hirsch's next group process is polarization, i.e., opposition to authorities, during which a group grows to become from a collection of isolated individuals into a powerful opposition. His final group dynamic is collective decision-making, which,

Plays an important role in motivating the continuing commitment of movement participants. Movements often have group discussions about whether to initiate, continue, or end a given protest. Committed protesters may feel bound by group decisions made during such discussions, even when those decisions are contrary to their personal preferences.¹²⁴

Like Fantasia, Hirsch places emerging commitment to the cause within episodes of collective action and not within romanticized, preexisting mobilizing structures. Their conceptualization is clearly distinct from the earlier vision, where 'before collective action is likely to occur, a critical mass of people must socially construct a sense of injustice.'¹²⁵ The authors also stress the contingent and fragile nature

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Benford, R. (1997) 'An insider's critique of the social movement framing perspective', *Sociological Inquiry*, vol. 67, no. 4, October, pp. 409-430.

of these formations, which nonetheless determine the course of social mobilizations.

The objective of this chapter was to review major theories and approaches in the field of social movements and mobilizations. The rational choice, resource mobilization and the political opportunity approaches may partially explain the insurgency of social groups in the Kyrgyzstani periphery in the immediate post-revolutionary period. The attractiveness of these approaches is that they rest on the assumption that power is concentrated within a limited scope of political actors and hence, they view social movements as popular efforts of the marginalized against domination. From the rational choice and political opportunity perspectives, it can be argued that the Kyrgyzstani peripheral uprisings are rational attempts by excluded groups who were able to seize a unique revolutionary opportunity in a bid to end domination. To do so, we assume, they employed available resources of mobilization such as pre-existing informal networks, community solidarities and regional identities.

Conceptual problems arise, however, when these concepts face the difficulty of explaining what follows after emergence of social mobilizations. Assuming that the central structure of political opportunities is a stable variable (because the political centre is equally 'uncertain' for all rebellious groups, whether they originate from x or y periphery), the rational choice theory fails to account for why actors keep engaging if their environment has a demobilizing effect on them. Furthermore, resource mobilization cannot predict under what circumstances impoverished peripheral communities can engage in protracted contention against their opponents. Moreover, resource mobilization fails to clarify the varying degrees of sustainability among different social mobilizations due to their seemingly equally poor access to resources. It appears therefore that, from the preceding discussion, the emergence of social mobilizations is less puzzling than the persistence of social mobilizations against the Kyrgyzstani demobilizing environment.

As a result, it is therefore natural that my interest shifts from explaining the emergence of protests toward understanding their capacity to endure. In making this shift, I rely on social protest construction approach that focuses on actual mobilizations and processes of association in order to explain how groups can sustain against their opponents, cultivate internal solidarity among participants and shape individual beliefs within collective action. The focus on action-oriented events and group processes allows me to 'see' dynamics that are conducive to the construction of protests, group formation and the consolidation of enduring practices of contestation in places where traditional theories will fail to do so. Yet to adopt an approach that was designed to explain Western mobilizations within a contemporary non-Western context is generally a questionable exercise. I will therefore take the Kyrgyzstani theoretical and empirical contrast further in the next chapter, where I will introduce my own conceptual framework, created on the basis of existing literature and preliminary empirical observations of the Kyrgyzstani context.

CHAPTER III: FROM THEORY TO RESEARCH DESIGN

As already noted in Chapter I, the study of Kyrgyzstani social mobilizations has both empirical and theoretical benefits. Empirically, it is interesting to discover how protest groups within this global periphery are able to rise up and organize themselves against a background of weak resources and precarious structural conditions. Theoretically, it is especially useful to observe what the Kyrgyzstani phenomenon can teach us about social mobilizations in a non-industrialized and weakly institutionalized context. In this chapter, I will further the discussion regarding the development of social mobilizations and outline my methodological approach. It is my hope that in the process of contrasting the expectations provided by previous research and the challenges that stem from the field, I will be able to formulate new explanations and develop a conceptual framework. In the first part of the chapter, I will lay out my own explanatory framework. In the second part, I will provide an example of data deficiency concerning social mobilizations in order to practically demonstrate the severe limitations they impose on quantitative and qualitative inquiries made in Kyrgyzstan. In the final

part, I will explain my selection of case studies, as well as my methodological approach.

I. Proposal: the Production of Trust and the Formation of Conditions for Structured Mobilizations

Except for the late constructivist approach, other theories found within the traditional social movement literature that I have addressed in the previous chapter seem to be largely concerned with already established movements. But how do we account for the Kyrgyzstani context in which social mobilizations seem to be sporadically erupting and expressing themselves in unstructured or weakly structured episodes of mobilizations, which do not yet constitute coherent organizations? How do we account for the middle stage that occurs (if indeed it does) between the provisional expressions of resistance and the formation of organizations of resistance? This problem can, perhaps, be addressed by investigating the conditions in which these episodes are constructed.

But why would one actually need to construct meaning of ongoing events, formulate a picture of one's opponent, categorize processes and invent new frameworks in order to participate in social mobilizations? From the perspective of a current Western activist, such endeavours may seem outdated, because she is most likely to act upon the long history of extended political participation and rich experience of questioning of existing hierarchies and orders. In addition, views on issues of modernity and post-modernity have already been formulated in both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses and propagated via the institutional vehicles of education, family, profession, citizenship and others. It does not take much effort, then, to become, for example, a follower of the Green movement, because 'pro' and 'anti' nuclear positions have been long researched, formulated and consolidated. Similarly, to be a feminist in the West is no longer position that entails the laborious work of making sense of the histories of male, the state, ideological and other types of domination; all these are long 'banalized' by and made available by social movements.

The situation is less obvious in countries that are part of the 'developing' world and that are marked by emerging weak public spaces, narrow political participation, minor experience regarding peaceful popular mobilizations and few success stories concerning the efficacy of protests in terms of advancing societal interests. In addition, new opportunities for global finances and economies in these countries produce unseen subjects and objects of contention; however, the role of the state in regulating these new experiences remains far too insignificant in Kyrgyzstan. The role of education is another important factor: at one end of the spectrum, public schools and universities offer a non-critical worldview based on Soviet legacy; on the other end of the spectrum, private institutions promote the values of either American liberalism or Islamic establishments. In turn, local governments and public associations have a hard time incorporating the new experiences introduced by development aid agencies, foreign investors and transnational elites into their traditional lifestyles. In Kyrgyzstan, social actors struggle to make sense of these events, notions and processes before they can eventually translate their confused attitudes into collective resistance.¹²⁶

Moreover, certain features of central politics add to this obfuscated picture. From the external observer's point of view, Kyrgyzstani central politics can be characterized by weak political organizations that are unfit to represent diverse social interests, state institutions that are diverted to serve elite interests and arbitrary courts that often fail to mediate conflicts. Although researchers are always better positioned than the social activists of developing countries by the simple advantage of having better access to information and knowledge, the peripheral groups that I studied over four years expressed uncertainty and mixed

¹²⁶ In this context, it would not be unwise to suggest the impact of Soviet legacy on the development of grassroots activism in post-Soviet states. See the 'path dependency' discussion in the following literature: Linz, J. and Alfred, S. (1996) *Problem of democratic transition and consolidation: Southern Europe, South America and Post-Communist Europe*, Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press; Nielsen, K., Jessup, B. and Jerzy, H. 'Institutional change in post-socialism', in Hausner, J., Jessop, B. and Nielsen K. (ed.) (1995) *Strategic choice and path-dependency in post-socialism institutional dynamics in the transformation process*, Aldershot: Edward Elgar.

emotions about these same features of central politics. Specifically, protest groups were unsure which institutions were in charge of their issues, who made informal decisions outside of formal regulations and to which side judges would ally themselves when deciding on their issues. The uncertainty regarding these centres of power had real implications for social mobilizations in terms of their form, volume and intensity.

I argue that in the context of generalized distrust and discredited politics, the condition that allows sustaining mobilizations is the *production of trust*. The task for any local resistance group is to overcome the suspicion that surrounds, *a priori*, anyone who claims to represent collective interests and grievances. The production of trust is an active process and is effected in instances where initiators can be observed and monitored. Only the production of trust can allow for provisional protest groups to pass to a more sophisticated level of internal organization where there is hope for sustainability. Once trust is produced, it needs to be maintained. This process is no less easy than the preceding task of producing trust and more resources are required to sustain a protest movement. Following Piotr Sztompka on trust and the social construction of protests approach, I will explain in this section how a successful production of trust within protest groups determine the course of development of fragmented or provisional mobilizations.

Before doing so, it is perhaps useful to detail once again the level of my analysis under which I will be discussing the production of trust. If traditional SMT operates essentially in terms of two categories of leaders and members, the unstructured nature of Kyrgyzstani local mobilizations forces me to diversify my analytical toolkit. Thus, I propose that local episodes of mobilization start with the 'initiators' or 'organizers of mobilization', the 'participants of mobilization' and the 'wider local audience' that observes mobilization and attempts to make sense of it. Initiators and participants of initial mobilization are not leaders and/or members of a movement yet. To achieve this, both leadership and membership must be established discursively, but most importantly, within the process of action. My

point about the structuration of the organization of mobilization as a necessary condition for the formation of sustainable mobilization does not imply either the adoption of Western models of organization¹²⁷ within the weakly institutionalized Kyrgyzstani context, nor does it suggest structuring fluid aspects that cannot be structured such as loose networks of sympathizers.

My emphasis on the organization of mobilization implies issues of legitimacy and authenticity, which are hard to achieve in the Kyrgyzstani context of generalized distrust towards representative politics and collective action. By generalized distrust I mean a current condition by which the increasing clash between informal and open politics have not yet produced tangible meanings: informal politics does not provide any longer with explanations of ongoing events and with orientations for future, whereas open politics has not developed enough. In addition, the current political climate sends strong signals to individuals that any collective action will not be worth the effort, because state institutions are perceived as 'non-responsive' or as reacting slowly and/or arbitrarily to societal grievances, while political organizations appear as inefficient with regards to mediating social conflicts. In Kyrgyzstan, there are no established institutions that allow for regularly channelling societal grievances into political agendas, as is largely also the case in Western societies.

The general fatigue about politics results in smaller protests; they rarely exceed 100 individuals (the topic of discussion in the next section of this chapter). Indeed, most of the Kyrgyzstani grassroots movements remain 'local' in terms of how they are rooted within local arenas and rely on local resources. With the exception to the Tulip Revolution of 2005, localized mobilizations have never managed to unite into nation-wide movements despite the existence of (albeit

¹²⁷ Within the Western conceptualization, social movements are understood as a combination of the organization of social movements and loose networks of movement members and sympathizers (Tarrow, 1994). If the first serves the primary task of organization and coordination, which consists of fundraising, media representation and building alliances with other movements and elites, the second remains within loose networks that are activated during times of actual mobilizations (Della Porta and Diani, 1999).

fragmented) informal networks across provinces. The geographical confinement of mobilizations has real implications for their modes of operation: issues of membership recruitment and the viability of the cause are subjected to many more 'mundane' questions of loyalty, everyday life conflicts and the local structures of political and economic relations.

For a group of initiators that aspire to effect change (institutional, policy, legislative) through peaceful public contestation it becomes essential to form lasting mobilizations. Taking into account the above influencing factors, lasting mobilizations in return require leadership structures that are legitimate in the eyes of members, as well as membership that is committed to the cause within time and space. This may sound self-evident to Western readers; no new member will, for example, think to question the commitment of the head of Greenpeace to the cause prior to joining the movement. In the Kyrgyzstani context, however, this condition is difficult to achieve; local audiences often suspect mobilization initiators of not being authentic, whereas initiators cannot be sure that members who show commitment one day will turn up the next. Yet only the crystallization of a legitimate organization from the initial spontaneous unstructured mobilization can provide conditions for lasting, i.e. structured, mobilizations for the purposes of public contestation. If the local group of initiators does not succeed in being recognized as a legitimate leadership and subsequently create a followership, it can only hope to continue producing sporadic episodes of mobilization, with fewer opportunities for achieving goals. By constitution of structures of leadership and membership, I imply the established and recognized roles of leaders and members.

Amid generalized distrust that proliferates even in the remotest corners of Kyrgyzstan, how then are structures of trustworthy leadership and membership formed? I argue that they can be created if mobilization participants overcome suspicions and establish *trust* in each other. What type of trust over what types of suspicions is implied here?

In Kyrgyzstan, future group members need to be convinced that to-be-leaders represent *collective* interests (open politics) and do not seek to exploit societal grievances in a bid to advance their own personal benefits (informal politics).¹²⁸ This type of trust is a condition *sine qua non* for the formation of leadership and membership, which in turn provides resources for structured social mobilizations in Kyrgyzstan. In this regard, only active engagement with the local audience can provide the potential means for overcoming generalized suspicion and for disrupting the logic of discredited corrupt politics, and the resulting social disintegration. Neither external resources (whether material or cultural), nor forced ideologies or grievance agendas can be taken for granted. Furthermore, to fully understand the challenge ahead for any social mobilization on the Kyrgyzstani periphery, one must also reject simplistic notions of traditional bonds, whether regional or kinship-like, which often feature prominently in both academic and common sense narratives alike in accounts of quick mobilizations in Kyrgyzstan.

Local provisional expressions of resistance can therefore be expected to transform into structured mobilizations against a background of a weak institutional infrastructure and generalized distrust if (1) **initiators of initial mobilization overcome generalized suspicion and prove that they represent collective interests**; (2) **participants of initial mobilization establish trust in initiators and participate in subsequent mobilizations**. As such, I have created an important causal effect between the successful production of trust within reciprocal interactions and the sustainability of mobilizations. I have also included an intervening variable, i.e. the existence of opportunist activists whom I call ‘brokers’ and whose effects magnify the fragmentation within protest groups. My model is similar to what scholars of social movement literature have written

¹²⁸ Social movement literature and specifically, rational choice theory pays attention to the issues of free-riding attitudes within collective action. Mancur Olson’s seminal work is a good example of the intellectual problematization of human behaviour within groups. Yet rational choice theory has limited explanatory power in non-Western societies, where individuals can only make hypotheses about situations in which they operate.

about persuasion and beliefs. Consider, for example, the following according to Klandermans:

[The] public can be persuaded if one of the three following conditions prevails: the public adheres to the collective belief system of the persuading agent; the persuading agent can, in one way or another, anchor its arguments in the collective beliefs of the public; or the persuading agent succeeds in transforming the collective beliefs of the public.

This reasoning is also akin to Snow et al.'s concept of frame alignment (1986), except for one chief difference, i.e. that 'neither anchoring nor transformation takes place among individuals in *isolation* [italic original].'¹²⁹ Although Western scholarship connects persuasion to problems of credibility regarding proposed beliefs by the persuading agents, Klandermans' model highlights the circularity of interactions between the persuading agent and the public, which is also the case in my own logic. Yet, in Kyrgyzstan, efforts and challenges of persuasion are levelled not only at suspicions of the credibility of the cause, but also at the persuading agency *per se*.

At this point, my research problem has been delineated in a preliminary fashion; the task ahead will consist of exploring the two conditions that shape the sustainability of social mobilizations in Kyrgyzstan. However, these conditions need to be further discussed. More specifically, *how* do participants test the would-be-leaders for authenticity and *where* do would-be-leaders prove their commitment? In other words, I need to outline my conceptualization of the production of trust before examining the two conditions.

Different explanations of the power of 'cognitive' (McAdam, 1982) or 'cultural' (Johnston, 2013) resources exist in the context of the development of social movements and mobilizations. As already noted in Chapter II, I find Hirsch and Fantasia's social constructivist approaches more useful in this regard. These authors discovered separately that such resources are formed during the

¹²⁹ Klandermans, B. (1992) 'The social construction of protest and multiorganizational fields', in Morris, A. and Mueller, C. (ed.) *Frontiers in social movement theory*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, p. 84.

processes of association. For Fantasia (1988), solidarity bonds are created within actual episodes of mobilization. For Hirsch (1990), participants are most likely to develop ideological commitment to a collective cause within group processes.

Following their action-oriented and processual approaches, I argue that in the Kyrgyzstani context, trust is produced within a special *monitoring process*. The monitoring process offers opportunities for individuals to regularly observe the behaviour of initiators of mobilization and other participants, and to make informed decisions about whether to participate on the basis of these observations. The monitoring process is an ongoing and important exercise, because individuals have to be continuously convinced that the organization of mobilization represents *collective* interests and does not employ societal grievances to seek for private benefits. Monitoring as a social practice emerged as a response to the discrediting effects of politics in Kyrgyzstan. If a given local site has no previous contentious experience that can inform the local audience about the behaviour of initiators, monitoring takes place in action, i.e., during actual episodes of mobilization. Thus, individuals might take part in initial mobilization because it presents the only means to form opinions about organizers and ongoing events. This explains the paradoxical occurrence of sporadic mobilizations that may not necessarily lead to further developments. Such conceptualization of 'active' production of trust is akin to Sztompka's concept of trust, which involves commitment on the side of individuals who make bets in regard to others' conduct in the future.¹³⁰

Taking into consideration the weak state of infrastructure that could allow individuals to form informed opinions about local and national events, the next question to ask is how and where monitoring processes occur. From my preliminary observations of two case studies, the conditions for monitoring emerge as a result of the desire of initiators to extend and sustain their mobilizations by attracting new participants. By attempting to convince people to

¹³⁰ Sztompka, P. (1999), p. 25-26.

join the cause, initiators create what I call 'open spaces' that serve to propagate injustice frames and grievances, share information, formulate collective demands and discuss a programme of actions. Such open spaces are usually provisional and serve as an occasional but indispensable basis for different group processes, including monitoring. In Western contexts, the recruitment of members is nowadays facilitated by social networks, publicity and mailing lists. In Kyrgyzstan, if a local protest group wants to grow beyond the core group of believers, it has to use available resources, the creation of open spaces being one of them. In the case of mobilization in Aral village, monitoring took place within new 'village public gatherings' that initiators of anti-mining resistance established for the purpose of shaping environmental and nationalist claims against a foreign miner. Residents used these gatherings to observe initiators and to draw conclusions about their authenticity. Observations made during these gatherings were central to the trajectory of this brief anti-mining mobilization. In the case of labour-based mobilizations in Kochkor-Ata, workers had many more opportunities to check on initiators and new management, from inspecting their production performances to establishing collective control over the company's policies and budget. Hence, the monitoring process took place on a variety of occasions created by local mobilizations.

However, monitoring does not always lead to the production of trust; monitoring processes can also foster suspicion. The creation of open spaces that provide possibilities for observation inevitably brings the risk of increased public scrutiny and hence, includes high odds for initiators to be discredited if they are suspected of non-authenticity. For this reason, monitoring can cause the further fragmentation of protest groups and the deconstruction of initial mobilization. This in turn can have an important impact for the study of collective action in Central Asia. In contrast to traditional social movement literature, social mobilization can in this case – to put it bluntly – cause further social disintegration. I therefore view *trust as a fragile and contingent resource* that is being constructed or deconstructed within the processes of association.

Since both the initiators and participants of mobilization are involved in open spaces, the latter represent a *reciprocal dynamic* consisting of bottom-up and top-down communications. As such, this reciprocal dynamic presupposes a certain degree of voluntary transparency and deliberation on the part of initiators on the one hand, and the participation of interested individuals, if only by monitoring and observation on the other. It becomes apparent that initiators need to deliberate in public if they seek to overcome the suspicions of a local audience and individuals require open spaces in order to observe others before establishing trust in the authenticity of an ongoing collective enterprise. *Trust is therefore shaped actively and through repeated interactions.*

Only if trust is established can legitimate leadership and committed membership arise. Only if this critical stage is achieved can a local group of resistance hope to transform its initial provisional episodes of mobilization into structured mobilization. Thus, the production of trust is a condition *sine qua non* for the formation of lasting mobilizations.

The creation of trust is also conducive to further processes that contribute to increased commitment to the cause, belief in the success of collective action and solidarity bonds. These processes include *collective learning*, *collective empowerment*, and *collective decision-making*. The final two processes I have borrowed from Eric Hirsch, who employed them to explain increased political commitment to the cause among Columbia University students in the U.S. Below, I will briefly outline my conceptualization of each of these processes.¹³¹

Collective learning can be understood as consciousness-raising in action. It is a process by which participants and initiators of mobilization gain new knowledge and information about a contentious topic (the subject of grievances and

¹³¹ The list is far from exhaustive and can also include new processes to reflect aspects of political and social relations in a given context.

disagreement) and their opponents. Since protest groups address their issues to institutions such as central government, the justice system and political organizations, local participants also learn about central politics and the rules by which they operate. In the context of widespread corruption and a 'fragmented' state, 'knowing whose rules rule' becomes essential for local groups in order to attribute blame (Javeline, 2009). In most cases, local groups address their issues to all possible institutions, because of not knowing their rights and understand the functioning of institutions and regulations. New knowledge and information subsequently shape internal strategies and tactics that imply public contestation. Learning process also shapes internal processes of sense-making regarding ongoing events, adjusting injustice frames, reformulating grievances and demands and correcting agendas (Snow et al. 1986). Depending on the available resources, learning process can be proactive in the sense that a local resistance group can undertake trips to the capital to gain information and exchange their experiences with other groups. In the case of Aral village, in the absence of resources, learning process occurred within few village gatherings, whereas in Kochkor-Ata, learning took place in frequent, all-worker gatherings and trips to the capital.

Collective decision-making. Hirsch argues that participants are more likely to continue committing to a movement's cause if they consider themselves part of collective deliberation and decision-making. Indeed, collective decision-making can be critical to establishing democracy within a group as a powerful mechanism for securing existing membership and attracting new followers. The effects of this process are particularly significant for groups who face internal conflicts. In addition, in the process of learning, some insurgent groups may deliberately choose to cultivate internal mechanisms of collective decision-making in order to render their decisions more legitimate in the eyes of opponents and the public. This process also enables collectives to grow as powerful social actors once initial trust has been established and leadership and membership bases have been constituted. In the Aral case study, unsuccessful

construction of lasting mobilization led to breakdowns within the body of decision-making, i.e., the Aral commission. In contrast, in the Kochkor-Ata case study, collective decision-making was established through strong union-based mechanisms of collective deliberation.

Collective empowerment. As Hirsch notes, the actual protest sites can illustrate 'how many are willing to take the risks associated with challenging authority.'¹³² These instances establish specific norms for participation and belonging that cannot be tested during other group processes that do not involve the risk of clashing with opponents or repression from the state. These new risks require from movement participants renewed confirmation of their commitment. These episodes generally lead either to weakened or heightened membership and their varied degrees of readiness for further resistance. Thus, successful collective actions further lead to an increased belief in the success of collective action, whereas unsuccessful episodes of mobilization are more likely to cast doubt on leadership and the worthiness of collective participation. In the following empirical chapters, I will show how the dynamics of collective empowerment set different trajectories for the development of mobilizations. In the case of Kochkor-Ata, collective empowerment was created during episodes of worker protest actions, whereas in Aral, this process was not achieved, because mobilization disintegrated already at the level of establishing trust in initiators.

I will explore the conditions that account for structured mobilizations by investigating the above four group processes in the following empirical chapters. However, before doing so, I need to stress the additional values that a processual approach brings to my study. First, the focus on processes and action is more productive for 'seeing' aspects that the structural approach cannot

¹³² While Hirsch's group processes concern an already established group of leaders and members whose authenticity and legitimacy are not questioned, my processes deal with the difficult task of creating preliminary trust in initiators and their proposed ideas. Hence, according to my understanding, group processes do not only account for the recruitment and commitment of members, as conceptualized by Hirsch, but are also accountable for the crystallization of categories of leaders and members.

capture. In the absence or weakness of existing local structures of integration, which usually provide individuals with knowledge and orientations, the salience of group processes acquires additional value in constructing collective meanings and action agendas. Second, I find the processual approach extremely useful for the purpose of rethinking current approaches to political participation in the Central Asian context, which in the words of Baliyar Sanghera, suffer from the conflation of the interdependent but different natures of structure and agency. This conflation produces a 'flat social ontology' that in turn leads to a variety of reductionisms. According to one such scientific reductionism that Sanghera identifies in the regional scholarship, political behaviour is conceptualized as a result of self-interest, mutual reciprocity and social norms.¹³³ In the light of this criticism, I view the emphasis on processes of meaning-making and contestation as a promising way to put forward the capacity of individuals to observe, reflect upon and evaluate individual and collective participation.

Before explaining the methods that I have employed for exploring the conditions that shape the different values of the dependent variable, I will provide in the following part an example of problematic quantitative data regarding social mobilizations that limit methodological options.

II. Insufficient Official Data On Social Mobilizations

In this section I provide a detailed description of the problematic pre-existing data on social mobilizations in Kyrgyzstan. To date, there has been no systematic survey of protests in Kyrgyzstan. Existing material is a product of partial and irregular surveys conducted by a number of local and international NGOs. National police carries out very basic analyses of protests that are not available to the public and the precision of which is questioned by the relevant NGOs.¹³⁴ For example, a leading employee of a local prominent NGO, Kylym-shamy,

¹³³ Sanghera, B. (2013).

¹³⁴ In the past, the Foundation for Tolerance International employed its Early Warning for Violence Prevention project to conduct such surveying and data gathering. This lasted from 2005 until 2008. The Coalition of NGOs also played a significant role in reporting information from the regions during the Tulip revolution.

contends that 'the Ministry of Interior doesn't bother to run aggregate analysis of protests. On the contrary, they got used to referring to our analysis when compiling their own scarce reports.'¹³⁵ I attempted to gain access to the MI's database but was denied admittance; I was also denied access to its database in the regional representations.

Several caveats need to be taken into account when using the existing surveys. The first problematic point is the use of definitions regarding social mobilizations. The law of the Kyrgyz Republic on 'peaceful gatherings' employs only one term, *mitingy*, to refer to the complex phenomenon of collective mobilization. By *mitingy*, the law identifies the 'intentional and temporary presence of individuals in places open for public access, with an objective of attracting the attention of state bodies, bodies of local self-governance and public opinion and including the expression of opinion on any matter.'¹³⁶ However, as a 2013 report by Kylym-shamy states:

Despite the absence of the classification of gatherings [within] the law on 'peaceful gatherings' state bodies continue to operate with non-effective norms by categorizing gatherings into '*mitingy*', 'pickets', 'public actions', 'blockades of highways', 'actions', '*aktcii protestov*' and unlawful '*aktcii protestov*'.¹³⁷

Both state institutions and NGOs use *mitingy*, *aktcii protestov*, *protestnie aktcii* interchangeably, without properly defining these terms. The Ministry of Interior generally employs *mitingy* and *protestnie aktcii*, that can be best translated as 'protests' and 'protest actions', together as an umbrella category that includes other types of collective action such as pickets, marches, road blockades, etc. Another problematic categorization occurs when the MI implements a typology of protests according to the nature of expressed grievances. Thus, the MI differentiates between '*obchestvenno-politicheskie*' (public-political), '*socialno-*

¹³⁵ Interview with Gulshair Abdirasulova, NGO 'Kylym-shamy', Bishkek, January 2014.

¹³⁶ Article 3, paragraph 6, the Law of the Kyrgyz Republic on 'peaceful gatherings'.

¹³⁷ *Kylym-shamy*, (2013) 'Observing the right for freedom of peaceful gatherings in the Kyrgyz Republic. Results of the monitoring carried out from October 2012 to June 2013', Bishkek, p. 16.

ekonomicheskie i bytovye’ (socioeconomic and daily routine) and *‘mej-etnicheskie*’ (inter-ethnic) causes of protests.

Another disputable point in these reports and official data is the selectivity regarding the periods being reported on. Reports by NGOs generally review only a limited period of the year or a restricted geographical area in which surveys are conducted. For example, a 2012 report carried out by OSCE team covers the period from 1 June to 15 December 2012 and incorporates 220 *mitingy* (protests).¹³⁸ OSCE is at least systematic in its comparative methodology: to compare protesting trends, OSCE selected the same period for the year 2011, which included 208 *mitingy*. Kylym-shamy’s 2013 report covers the period from 1 October 2012 to 30 June 2013, in which 205 *mitingy* were observed. This is roughly a quarter of 838 *mitingy* that took place in the country during the same period, according to the Ministry of Interior official data. Kylym-shamy did not conduct similar surveys in the previous years of 2010 and 2011, since as Abdirasulova notes: ‘protests in these immediate post-revolutionary years were occurring almost every day, and the organization was overwhelmed with other events. We began conducting protest surveys again in 2012.’¹³⁹

Official data on protests is scarce and not always available to the public. The MI’s new Internet site, sponsored by OSCE, contains partial information only for the year 2013. For previous years, MI announced their data via national mass media, which do not always reflect it accurately. The most problematic data comes from 2010, during which the MI registered only 685 ‘unsanctioned actions of protest’ in which 583 were *mitingy*, 83 were pickets, 15 were road blockades and four illegal land occupations.¹⁴⁰ Overall, 38 000 individuals took part in these actions. According to the same data, the overwhelming majority of these actions were

¹³⁸ OSCE, (2012) ‘Sobludenie prava na svobodu mirnyh sobraniy v Kyrgyzskoi Respublike. Monitoring praktiki realizacii’ [Observation of the right to freedom of peaceful gatherings in the Kyrgyz Republic. Monitoring of practices of realization], M Maxima: Bishkek.

¹³⁹ Interview with Gulshair Abdirasulova, Kylym-shamy, Bishkek, 31.01.14.

¹⁴⁰ ‘V Kyrgyzstane v 2010 bilo 685 mitingov i akcii protesta’ [In 2010, in Kyrgyzstan there were 685 protests and actions of protest], *Obchestvenny Reiting* (27 January 2011), <http://www.pr.kg/news/kg/2011/01/27/18919/> [4 February 2014].

‘political’ (524) and the remaining 161 had a ‘social’ character. The marginal ‘social’ aspect appears odd if one considers the widely accepted notion that the 2010 uprisings against the authoritarian regime arose as the result of poverty and elite corruption.¹⁴¹ The 2010 data, a year in which the country was shaken not only by popular uprisings but also by ethnic clashes, appeared to have been underestimated. The low number of mobilizations registered by MI during this year perhaps reflects the analytical and technical inability of official authorities to cover all events across the country.

In 2011, MI accounted for 1193 *aktcii* (actions of protest) that included 680 *mitingy*, 428 pickets, 18 marches and 16 demonstrations.¹⁴² During this year, participants blocked roads 51 times. The number of ‘political’ demands remained relatively at the same level compared to the previous year (626 *aktcii*), whereas the number of socioeconomic demands grew to 562 *aktcii*. Bishkek remained the most attractive protest site (582 *aktcii*) and Jalal-Abad Province was second (158 *aktcii*) on the list. Despite the fact that the number of protests almost doubled, the amount of participants involved remained at the same level at roughly 38 000 people. This possibly reflects the tendency that protests became a popular means for expressing societal grievances and demands, despite the size of protest groups remaining small.

In 2012, according to MI data, protests continued increasing to reach some 1286 *aktcii* that included 537 *mitingy*, 706 pickets, four marches, two demonstrations, 36 road blockades, and one illegal land occupation.¹⁴³ Traditionally, the majority of *aktcii* took place in Bishkek (726); the second largest number of *aktcii* occurred (already seeming to form a tradition) in Jalal-Abad Province (154). MI notes that the number of *aktcii* oriented towards socioeconomic themes (692) prevailed over politically-oriented *aktcii* (587). These also involved larger population groups

¹⁴¹ Gullette, D. (2010a).

¹⁴² ‘Kyrgyzstan buzachiy’ [Restless Kyrgyzstan], *De lo* (17 April 2014), <http://delo.kg/index.php/health-7/7138-kyrgyzstan-buzyashchij> [29 June 2015].

¹⁴³ ‘Kyrgyzstan buzachiy’ [Restless Kyrgyzstan], *De lo* (17 April 2014), <http://delo.kg/index.php/health-7/7138-kyrgyzstan-buzyashchij> [29 June 2015].

totalling 73 000 people – almost twice as many as in 2011. This suggests that protests became larger in size and involved more participants.

For 2013, MI recorded 849 *mitingy and protestnie aktcii*, which gathered some 199 000 people, an unprecedentedly large number compared to previous years.¹⁴⁴ These included 521 *mitingy*, 298 pickets, four marches, and 26 road blockades. Politically-oriented protests (519) were again a primary focus, with socioeconomic protests numbering 330. The majority of protests took place in Bishkek (37'000) and Issik-Kul Province (16'000). In 2014, MI registered only 448 *mitingy*, which led Vice Prime Minister Abdyrahman Mamataliev to make the joyful conclusion that 'citizens held a better respect for law and order.'¹⁴⁵

The frequency of protests in Bishkek is not surprising, given that it is the political and judicial capital of the country. A large amount of protest actions in Bishkek is related to resonant court cases, which attracted to the capital the families and sympathizers of those concerned. For example, the most publicly resonant case produced 79 *aktcii* in 2013 and regarded events concerning the April Revolution. Another important court case involved the trial concerning deputies Kamchybek Tashiev and Japar Sadyrov, who were accused of carrying out an attempt at the unconstitutional overthrowing of government in 2011; 27 *aktcii* were related to this case. Outside of the capital, the fluctuation of protests in provinces reflected the domination of political topics in public debates and political struggles. In 2013, Issik-Kul Province scored the highest amount of *aktcii* compared to other provinces, due to controversies surrounding the country's largest gold mine Kumtor, located in Issik-Kul Province. Jalal-Abad Province was also one of the most agitated places of the country. Here, in 2012 and 2013, the primary

¹⁴⁴ 'V Kyrgyzstane v proshlom godu proshlo 849 mitingov i protestnih akcii' [There were 849 mitingy and protest actions in Kyrgyzstan last year], *Kabar* (20 February 2014), <http://www.kabar.kg/rus/society/full/72047> [20 February 2014].

¹⁴⁵ 'V Kyrgyzstane v 2014 godu bylo provedeno 448 mitingov i akcii protesta – A. Mamataliev' [A. Mamataliev: There were 448 mitingy and actions of protest in Kyrgyzstan in 2014], *Kabar* (26 January 2015), <http://www.kabar.kg/law-and-order/full/89303> [24 August 2015].

contentious topic was the trial involving deputy Tashiev, who is native of Jalal-Abad.¹⁴⁶

In addition to the problematic methodology of the MI, OSCE specifies its own application of the above categories. By ‘public-political’ causes, it implies ‘political protest actions by citizens or organizations against political actions by bodies of power.’¹⁴⁷ By ‘socioeconomic’ reasons, it understands ‘public protest actions that focus on questions related to conditions of life, labor, education, health of the population and other parameters of social and economic policies.’¹⁴⁸ The point is that whatever the causes of protests, their interaction with central or local bodies of power ultimately turn them political. Thus, in many cases, ‘socioeconomic’ protests reach a climax where protesters demand the resignation of the political personnel of relevant institutions responsible for wrongdoings – or doing nothing at all. Either way, they become political; this gives rise to questions about the MI and others’ application of categories. The typology used by the state and other organizations informs us about the nature of public grievances and therefore, highlights the fixation of these institutions on the origins of protests.

According to Kylym-shamy’s typology, which is similar to that of the MI, in 2013, 73% of *mitingy* addressed public-political issues, while 15% addressed socioeconomic issues, 20% ‘inter-ethnic relations’ and the remaining 3% addressed cultural-historical claims.¹⁴⁹ OSCE’s survey also highlights the overwhelming prevalence of ‘public-political’ causes in 2011 and 2012 over others – 81.8% in 2012 and 76.2% in 2011, compared to ‘socioeconomic’ causes that were 18.2% in 2012 and 23.8% in 2011.¹⁵⁰ A slight rise in the political over social causes in 2012 is a curious development. With the stabilization of the coalition government in early 2012, one would expect a drop in political claims

¹⁴⁶ ‘Kyrgyzstan buzachiy’ [Restless Kyrgyzstan], *Delo* (17 April 2014), <http://delo.kg/index.php/health-7/7138-kyrgyzstan-buzyashchij> [29 June 2015].

¹⁴⁷ OSCE, (2012), p. 17.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ *Kylym-shamy*, (2013), p.18.

¹⁵⁰ OSCE, (2012), p. 18.

and a rise in socioeconomic agendas. However, the presence of political protests can be explained by the electoral cycles that marked both 2011 and 2012. The OSCE notes that the surveys conducted during these consequential periods confirmed that, 'the role of gatherings increase during elections.' Protests become a popular tool when 'political parties, candidates to elections and other groups and organizations aim to channel their programs and mobilize the electorate's support.'¹⁵¹ Thus, 11.5% of 2011's *mitingy* were related to presidential campaigns, whereas 35.6% of 2012's *mitingy* were connected to local council elections.¹⁵²

In the period of October 2012 to June 2013, as reported by the Kalysh-shamy survey, four types of agents were most active in staging protests. They were 'physical persons' with 31% of participation, 'political parties and politicians' with 26%, 'initiative groups and public movements' with 21.5% and 'relatives and friends of politicians' with 14.6%. NGOs that were separated into a distinct group organized only 3.4% of *mitingy*.¹⁵³ That NGOs found themselves at the back-end of demonstrations is also a good indicator of the evolution of protests when compared to the period of 2005 to 2010, during which the 'civil society sector' was the most active. Again, figures presented in OSCE report are slightly different. In 2012, it found that actual persons were organizers of *mitingy* in 36% of cases, in 35.3% of cases they were political parties and in 19.6% of cases they were representatives of non-governmental organizations.¹⁵⁴

Another interesting point highlighted in surveys is the size of protests. Although these estimations are rough, the Kalysh-shamy survey suggests the most prevalent size of protests as ranging from 11 to 100 people (52% of observed protests). Protests with less than 10 people were also commonplace (12% of observed protests). Protests that exceeded 1000 people were rare and were

¹⁵¹ Ibid., p. 18.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Kalysh-shamy, (2013), p. 19.

¹⁵⁴ OSCE, (2012), p. 19.

staged by political parties only.¹⁵⁵ The OSCE survey concurs with these results. Both in 2011 and 2012, the number of large protests was insignificant. In 2012, the most prevalent size of groups ranged from 2 to 50 (in 43.2% of observed cases); groups that reached 100 people occurred two times fewer (22.3% of cases) and groups that did not exceed 300 people made up only 10.4%.¹⁵⁶

Another interesting element is the place in which the organization of protests takes place. The *Kylym-shamy* report stresses that half of observed gatherings were conducted in the proximity of state buildings, 21% were carried out in public places of open territories (such as parks and squares), 15% took place on territories adjacent to courts and 6% were conducted in front of foreign embassies.¹⁵⁷ The OSCE survey notes that protesters gathered in front of state institutions in 39.4% cases, on main plazas in 23.8% of cases, on streets in 21.8% of cases and in parks in 6.2% of cases. The OSCE report goes on to highlight a curious development concerning this point. Authors note that participants of protests left main plazas in favour of territories directly adjacent to relevant state bodies. They explain this by the fact that there is a growing understanding among participants that ‘the majority of problems can be solved quicker if addressed to relevant state bodies rather than creating unaddressed claims directed at power [abstract *vlast*] on the main plaza.’¹⁵⁸ The difference in numbers in respective reports again stems from variations within the covered periods.

To summarize this section, in comparison to Russian official data on protests, for example, as demonstrated in Graham Robertson’s work (2010), Kyrgyzstani data appears deficient and do not contribute much to a deepening analysis. From the scarce resources that I drew from in the above, we can nevertheless learn some important basic elements about modes of social mobilization: protest numbers

¹⁵⁵ *Kylym-shamy*, (2013), p. 20.

¹⁵⁶ OSCE, (2012), p. 20.

¹⁵⁷ *Kylym-shamy*, (2013), p. 21.

¹⁵⁸ OSCE, (2012), p. 25.

declined since the most acute period of 2010 to 2011; protesters' grievances have primarily political and social origins; protests are small in size; protests are primarily organized by actual persons. However, in addition to these general conclusions, neither official data nor NGO reports allow for elaborating on specific protest cases. The absence of data on particular case studies leads to an inability to establish basic facts such as the size and membership of protest groups. It is also not possible to account for modes of mobilization in terms of the protest agendas, the duration of mobilizations, etc. Another problem related to studying social mobilizations in Kyrgyzstan is the inability to account for public support. There is no established practice for measuring public opinion via national opinion polls, something that is common in the West. The absence of such data hinders our estimations about whether protest movements produce changes besides those effected in local contexts and personal situations. To summarize this section, scientific data are virtually unreliable and only superficial conclusions can be drawn from it. Given the Kyrgyzstani extensive history of protests and revolutions, it is even more surprising that this society has to date produced very little statistical observations on these matters.

III. Methodological Approach

Against this background of problematic quantitative data analysis and the unfeasibility of conducting a large-n analysis, what methods can be useful for answering the principal research question of this study, and what types of approaches will best illuminate the variables above? What are the empirical conditions for research conducted in Kyrgyzstan that have in additional ways shaped my methodological choice? In this section, I will outline my methodological approach and the selection of cases.

Since the onset of my research, I opted for a case-study approach governed by the principles of political ethnography. The case study method is generally considered as the weakest option when compared next to a large number of other methods and experiments. The case study is in particular criticized for the

fact that the data generated from a small number of cases cannot be further generalized and therefore, the method is viewed as non-theoretical.¹⁵⁹ However, scholars like Lijphart, Van Evera, George and Bennett have highlighted the benefits of the method in terms of its theoretical contributions to political science.¹⁶⁰ Thus, the case study is particularly strong in terms of clarifying concepts, exploring causal complexity and generating theory in a manner that other methods may be weaker at. A large-n method, for example, will be less suitable for addressing the nature of my question, i.e., to illuminate explanations and trace causal relationships between factors, because 'large-n methods tell us more about whether hypotheses hold than *why* they hold [emphasis added].'¹⁶¹ In the spirit of George and Bennett, it seems that even findings from a particular context can show conceptual relevance for a range of cases, especially those that share some of the empirical characteristics of a non-industrial society. A Kyrgyzstani study offers the potential for exploring a distinct phenomenon that can be translated into conceptual and theoretical discussions.

My case study methodology can be considered a 'hybrid' approach, as I employ three formats: multiple within-case comparisons (or congruence procedure), controlled comparison and process tracing. The congruence procedure permits for capturing variations of the dependent variable within a case over time. I do this because in my cases, I noticed that the sustainability of protests changed over time. A controlled comparison procedure was employed when comparing observations across cases. In the case of my research, I used cases that shared similar background characteristics but displayed divergent outcomes. Finally, process tracing examines the chain of events and processes 'by which initial case conditions are translated into case outcomes.'¹⁶² The usefulness of this

¹⁵⁹ King, G., Keohane, R. and Verba, S (1994) *Designing social inquiry: Scientific inference in qualitative research*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

¹⁶⁰ George, A. L. and Bennett, A. (2005) *Case studies and theory development in the social sciences*, Cambridge and London: MIT Press; Lijphart, A. (1971) 'Comparative politics and the comparative method', *American Political Science Review*, vol. 65, no. 3, September, pp. 682-693.

¹⁶¹ Van Evera, S. (1997) *Guide to methods for students of political science*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, p. 55.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 64.

method is that the 'cause-effect link that connects independent variable and outcome is unwrapped and divided into smaller steps.'¹⁶³ I believe my analysis will benefit from these methods in several respects. First, it will allow me to explore independent variables within case studies and to compare their causes across cases. Second, it is my hope that the combination of these procedures will permit generating a larger amount of observations sufficient for inferring theoretical explications about the studied phenomenon.

3.1. Selection of case studies

At the start of my research, as already noted in the Chapter I, I looked at several cases of social mobilization at the Kyrgyzstani periphery. Eventually, I selected two of these cases. The intellectual and methodological considerations that informed this choice were as follows. I did not select these cases because they represented the largest instances of mobilization; on the contrary, they are rather typical in terms of contentious contemporary Kyrgyzstani politics. Hence, they do not constitute 'deviant' cases and their exploration will be particularly useful for establishing 'a surprising value' for the dependent variable.¹⁶⁴

The selection of cases followed dual-type logic. On the one hand, I explicitly selected two areas that vary in terms of geography and modes of economic and political organization. Thus, one case represents a rural '*community-based*' *mobilization* that unfolded within a small village against a foreign mining firm and weak state. The second case exemplifies a '*labour-based*' *mobilization* that took place in a small town against a multifaceted central power system. I have applied quotation marks to define these cases because they do not represent typical community and labour driven collective actions; they include elements of communal and labour resistance, which allows me to use these categories for the sake of differentiation and clarity. In fact, their blurred structures of mobilization

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Seawright, J. and Gerring, J. (2008) 'Case selection techniques in case study research: a menu of qualitative and quantitative option', *Political research quarterly* vol. 61, no. 2, June, pp. 294-308.

will need to be established in the following empirical cases. The cases also represent different geographic locations (northern and southern provinces), which are believed to hold divergent political and cultural traditions. By juxtaposing these two different examples, my aim was to additionally observe whether the studied phenomenon was equally present across space and across different socioeconomic and political backgrounds.

On the other hand, despite some geographic and organizational distinctions, most importantly, the cases share a set of traits that are specific to the context and modes of mobilization. The method of comparing similar cases that indicate a varying degree of the dependent variable is referred to as Mill's 'method of difference'.¹⁶⁵ Van Evera considers the method of comparison the weakest among other case study formats, because in 'social science the characteristics of paired cases are never really identical (as the method of difference requires).'¹⁶⁶ I agree with this argument and therefore complemented this method with other case procedures, as outlined in the previous section. However, in the absence of other possibilities, the selection based on the method of difference is a good start for testing explanatory propositions, because the chosen cases display contrasting values where the dependent variable is concerned.

I would like to briefly outline the set of similarities that I observed in these localities and that helped me to establish my preliminary comparison. First, in both cases, peripheral dissent began immediately following major political changes at the centre. Local groups in both places began their opposition against the existing local order the day following the April Revolution. Regardless of the remoteness of the studied localities from the centre and their different mobilization 'bases' (work place and rural community, respectively), actors reacted to central developments as an opportunity for articulating and advancing their own interests. This suggests that the *structure of political opportunities*

¹⁶⁵ Mill, J. S. (1843) *A system of logic, ratiocinative and inductive: Being a connected view of the principles of evidence and the methods of scientific investigation*, volume 1, John W. Parker.

¹⁶⁶ Van Evera, S. (1997), p. 57.

serves as a powerful trigger for the periphery to launch local contention. This points further to the possibility that in the initial phase of mobilizations, political triggers may be significant enough to compensate for the lack of organizational resources that are needed to establish sustainable practices of contestation when compared to provisional rebellions.

Second, in both cases, groups suffered from *weak organizational resources* and a *lack of experience* in terms of engaging in contentious politics at the initial stage of mobilizations. Thus, in both cases, initial performances against opponents did not exemplify a coherent agenda, clear demands, an established repertoire of collective action or an ideological commitment. Furthermore, in both cases, protest movements had to invent new resources using existing scarce knowledge, unverified information and the weak local structures at their disposal. This was done while constructing their resistance and in the process of mobilizing participants, not before. It can thus be argued that access to limited resources and an absence of contentious experience do not, perhaps, discourage individuals at this stage, although they become crucial for sustained practices of contestation.

Third, both contentious sites equally faced challenges pertaining to *weakness of the organization of mobilization*. Contrary to the regional scholarship on the structure of Central Asian societies based on clan solidarities, patron-client relationships and regional identities, my cases exhibited a critical problem in relation to 'pre-existing structures of mobilization'. In both cases, the initiators and participants of initial mobilization had to form trustworthy leadership and a committed membership in the process of mobilization. The structuration of leadership and membership during the course of initial mobilization conditioned the future sustainability of groups' practices of contestation.

Fourth, against the background of these pre-existing conditions that worked against grassroots groups, the selected cases showed an amazing capacity for

the *self-organization* of individuals, whether it concerned reviving an old Soviet trade union or forming new associations. In both localities, actors resorted to 'conventional' means of contestation such as organizing public discussions, writing petitions and appealing to courts, prior to turning to 'unconventional' means such as protests and violent actions. This evidence goes against the widespread Orientalist assumption about the 'wild' Kyrgyzstani province as a place necessarily ruled by looters and local bosses. It suggests that despite the remoteness of the periphery and the deficiency or weakness of institutional channels, individuals can still initiate *collective action* together.

Fifth, my case studies are examples of resistance at the periphery against the centre. In both instances, actors opposed *central policies and institutions* in the sphere of the extractive industry, as well as the state management of natural resources. Bringing the 'southern and 'northern' provinces into perspective, it can be said that both cases exemplified similar grievances with central politics, regardless of their possible divergent loyalties to the central regime. However, for local actors, the central power system (*biylik*) is not a fully comprehensible notion whose decisions and rules of the game are not completely intelligible. Not knowing who exactly the opponent is significantly complicates mobilization, especially when local actors are already disadvantaged by a structural lack of resources. The state, as an overarching category, then becomes the target of social dissent, even in cases where it is only indirectly or partially involved in contentious topics; this happens because the state is perceived and treated as a mediator of societal conflicts on the ground.

Finally, both examples exhibited the presence of a high value on the *independent variables* under question and indicated salience pertaining to the trustworthiness of leaders and public group processes for the formation of trust within collective action. Yet they displayed a divergent degree of creation of trust and solidarity, which led in the two case studies to varying outcomes in terms of the sustainability of social practices of resistance. In the labour-based movement,

workers succeeded in strengthening the union as responsible for the organization of their movement whereas in the community-based movement, participants showed decreasing trust in the organization, which resulted in the demobilization of resistance. These similarities, I believe, will lead the analysis to the successful production of observations that can explain the varying outcomes in the two cases, i.e., the degree of sustainability of social practices of contestation.

3.2. Exploring the field

When doing research in this part of the world, one has to take into account the specificities of the 'field'. I would like to draw attention to some of these without attempting to provide an exhaustive list of problems. One of these specificities is the nature of political communications between the centre and the periphery, which has real implications for the ways ordinary citizens react to topics of concern and advance their rights *via* 'non-institutional' means. It can be argued that the localities that serve as prime research areas in this instance are characterized by a certain degree of political and information 'isolation'. Local actors resent this isolation in terms of being disconnected from central developments. As one member of a local NGO in Talas Province stated,

You, the people in Bishkek, are constantly in motion, there are ongoing protests and demonstrations on topics we ignore here. We, the people in Talas, are not even aware of these issues.¹⁶⁷

The above quote echoes an earlier finding by the non-governmental organization *Kylym-shamy* regarding the principal places that individuals nowadays select for protest-making. According to the *Kylym-shamy* report, in 2013, Bishkek was the most attractive place for protest activity: 113 out of 205 gatherings were organized in the capital.¹⁶⁸ That a large amount of protests takes place in the capital follows simple logic, considering the power and mass media concentration in Bishkek; protesters have a better chance of gaining public attention if they agitate in the centre than in their remote localities. Yet not every protest group

¹⁶⁷ Interview with a member of a local NGO in Talas Province, Bishkek, November 2014.

¹⁶⁸ *Kylym-shamy*, (2013), p.17.

can afford an organization of demonstrations far away from their homes in terms of money, time and human resources.

Poor media coverage¹⁶⁹ and deficient political communications do not only have real implications for the modes of self-organization of individuals at the periphery, but also have an impact for research. The lack of official data and insufficient pre-existing literature makes the gathering of information about 'location' essential to this thesis. Most importantly, however, in addition to the insufficient structuring of data, the nature of my research question requires a different type of approach than the analysis of press reports and statistical data. In addition to discovering various modes of mobilization, I am interested in people's perspectives about collective action, politics and the value of resistance against the *status quo*. As Charles Taylor writes, the imaginary pertains to 'the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.'¹⁷⁰ By following actors' perspectives and imaginaries, my goal is to compile the intentions, beliefs and actions that do (not) guide them in organizing resistance in collective forms, while at the same time showing the constraints and opportunities in social structures that orient their mobilization within time and space.

As these perspectives can be as rich and exciting as they can be contradictory and misleading, they point to what Morgan Liu has described in his book as the 'messy ground where ordinary people live.'¹⁷¹ Such messiness observed on the ground will not be particularly comforting to analyses and theories derived from a focus on macro structures. As Liu notes, the tendencies to 'interpret the complex post-socialist transformations through a grand narrative of transition toward

¹⁶⁹ Media coverage of popular dissent is a notorious problem in other parts of the world. See Zizek, S. (2012) *The year of dreaming dangerously*, Verso: London and New York.

¹⁷⁰ Taylor, Ch. (2002) 'Modern social imaginaries', *Public Culture*, vol.14, no. 1, winter, pp. 91-124.

¹⁷¹ Liu, M. (2003) 'Detours from utopia on the Silk Road: Ethical dilemmas of neoliberal triumphalism', *Central Eurasian Studies Review*, vol. 2, no. 3, pp. 2-10.

democracy and the free market...[misses] the actual processes of change playing out on the small scales of communities and individuals.¹⁷² In their earlier explorations of post-socialism, Burawoy and Verdery already made a call towards a focus on the 'small',

It is precisely the sudden importance of the micro processes lodged in moments of transformation that privileges an ethnographic approach. Aggregate statistics and compendia of decrees and laws tell us little without complementary close descriptions of how people ranging from farmers to factory workers, from traders to bureaucrats, from managers to welfare clients are responding to the uncertainties they face.¹⁷³

When it comes to contemporary Central Asian studies, the need for ethnographic scholarship has been even more pressing. Previously unknown terrain has been advanced thanks to rich ethnographic work by Christine Bichsel on irrigation disputes,¹⁷⁴ by Madeleine Reeves and Nick Megoran on borders and the nature of state,¹⁷⁵ by Morgan Liu on Osh city and the postcolonial legacy of citizenship and ethnicity,¹⁷⁶ by John Heathershaw on peace-building operations in Tajikistan,¹⁷⁷ by Judith Beyer on customary law,¹⁷⁸ by Baliyar Sanghera and Elmira Satybaldieva on moral economies¹⁷⁹ and by Gulzat Botoeva on safety nets and drug production,¹⁸⁰ to mention a few.

¹⁷² Liu, M. (2012) *Under Solomon's throne: Uzbek visions of renewal in Osh*, University of Pittsburgh Press, p. 18.

¹⁷³ Burawoy, M. and Verdery K. (ed.) (1999) *Uncertain transition: Ethnographies of change in the postsocialist world*, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, p. 2.

¹⁷⁴ Bichsel, C. (2009) *Conflict transformation in Central Asia: Irrigation disputes in the Ferghana Valley*, London and New York: Routledge.

¹⁷⁵ Reeves, M. (2014a) *Border work. Spatial lives of the state in rural Central Asia*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press; Megoran, N. (2007) 'On researching 'Ethnic Conflict': epistemology, politics, and a Central Asian boundary dispute', *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 59, no. 2, March, pp. 253-277.

¹⁷⁶ Liu, M. (2012).

¹⁷⁷ Heathershaw, J. (2009) *Post-conflict Tajikistan: The politics of peacebuilding and the emergence of legitimate order*, London: Routledge.

¹⁷⁸ Beyer, J. (2015) 'Customizations of law: Courts of elders (*aksakal* courts) in rural and urban Kyrgyzstan', *PoLar*, vol. 38, no. 1, May, pp. 53-71.

¹⁷⁹ Sanghera, B. and Satybaldieva, E. (2009) 'Moral sentiments and economic practices in Kyrgyzstan: the internal embeddedness of a moral economy', *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, vol. 33, no. 5, pp. 921-935.

¹⁸⁰ Botoeva, G. (2014).

I also employ elements of ethnographic approach in my own research. The focus of ethnographic attention in this thesis is two localities that were marked by intense mobilizations. These localities represent the potential for being exposed to great diversity regarding politics, as well as the necessary conspiracies that accompany contentious politics. Yet ethnography is not employed for ‘finding pockets of knowability within a dizzy world system.’¹⁸¹ As Peters notes, ‘that much of this research is done in the name of ethnography suggests the perseverance of near-sight as a mode of human experience of the world, even when the objects of vision are transported from afar.’¹⁸² This is an important point, since – as already noted above – the very nature of relationships between protest movements and their opponents unavoidably brings together individual worlds representing different aspirations and concerns with a system of political and socioeconomic relations and public opinion. To address micro- and macro issues pertaining to ethnography of a locale, Peters suggests adopting a ‘bifocal’ approach to place in order to keep an ‘eye on both the local and the global.’¹⁸³ In the cases observed in this thesis, this means looking closely at local arenas of contentious activities, while observing their operation against a background of large-scale socioeconomic and political structures. In practice, this means that my research journey had to follow the actions of local actors, which took them from their localities to the capital in order to explore central institutions, to find political support and to build alliances with other civic groups, before returning to their local vicinities in order to create new meanings and trust within their respective political communities.

Time is another important analytical category. I began to more closely observe sites of anti-mining resistance in Aral when the most acute period of confrontation

¹⁸¹ Peters, J. D. (1997) ‘Seeing bifocally: Media, place culture’, in Gupta, A. and Ferguson, J. (ed.) *Culture, power, place: Explorations in critical anthropology*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, p. 80. See also Apandurai’s critique of current ethnographic approaches that are charged with too much focus on locality and not enough emphasis on the global circulation of objects, capital and people that are also central to localities, Apandurai, A. (1990) ‘Disjuncture and difference in the global cultural economy’, in Featherstone, M. (ed.) *Global culture: Nationalism, globalization and modernity*, London: Sage.

¹⁸² Peters, J. D. (1997), p. 86.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

between local groups and their opponents was over. If I were to address the most intense period of contestation between anti-mining activists and the mining company during the period from 2010 and 2011, I would be likely to conclude this as a successful example of rural resistance against a foreign firm. Observing a series of villagers' collective action, which consisted of peaceful demonstrations that were later reinforced by more violent pressures on the company, would support such a conclusion. However, time showed that the use of violence unexpectedly led to the disintegration of the resistance movement from inside, as well as to the failure of maintaining the initial success of activists. Thus, the subsequent period from 2012 to 2013 showed the opposite result, i.e., the resistance movement was unable to consolidate itself in the face of internal problems. Time also helps us to appreciate the learning process of actors as an important element of the post-Soviet legacy. The learning process seems to be crucial for group formation, since groups learn and build up new expectations and hopes based on their past experiences of collective action. Thus, if I were to observe initial episodes of labour mobilizations that took place in 2010, I would expect them to fail at drawing the attention of authorities or the public. Such a conclusion would be informed by the fact that their early protests had been weakly structured, their leaders were controversial and their demands ill-formulated. Yet, in a period of four years, workers gained impressive experience about learning strategies and tactics of contestation. Thus my study of cases of peripheral resistance during a lengthy period of time allows drawing observations on the *sustainability* of groups against external and internal challenges.

3.3. Collecting data

For the purpose of this study, I conducted short and longer fieldtrips to the Kyrgyzstani provinces during different periods between 2010 and 2015. In both case studies, my data relied primarily on interviews and participatory observations. For the Kochkor-Ata case study, I conducted extensive interviews with participants of the movement, representatives of local and national trade unions, representatives of local 'mediating' organizations, members of the former

board of directors of the Kyrgyzneftegaz company, officials of relevant state agencies, members of the Kyrgyzstani Parliament and a small number of local journalists and NGOs. For the Aral case study, I conducted interviews with participants of mobilization, anti-mining activists, staff of the Gold Fields mining company, representatives of other extracting companies, local authorities, officials of state agencies and a small number of environmental, non-governmental organizations and journalists based in Bishkek. In summary, for Kochkor-Ata and Aral, I collected 31 and 34 in-depth interviews, respectively. The interviews were semi-structured, that is, I did not have a written list of exactly worded interview questions, but rather a list of theory-generated topics that I could adjust to the situation at hand. Most interviews with protest groups were conducted in Kyrgyz; those that targeted state officials were mainly conducted in Russian, a language that is still dominantly used in officialdom. Interviews with the mining companies were conducted in English and Russian.

None of the interviews were recorded for pragmatic purposes. For the Aral case, the reason for my decision not to put the interviewees on record was related primarily to the involvement of certain residents in violent acts against the opponent. Since the second violent attack did not receive full investigation, residents remained suspicious towards one another and as a result feared that recorded material could be used against them. In order not to further exacerbate these tensions or become involved in mutual accusations, I opted at an early stage not to use a recorder. In the Kochkor-Ata case, I was initially targeted as a journalist commissioned by either a state agency or a member of the elite and because of an ongoing 'war of information' between the labour force and various opponents, I decided it would be wise not to attract unnecessary suspicion and hence, did not record my sources. Instead, I took notes during interviews and observations or alternatively, wrote down notes after returning from meetings.

In addition to the interviews as my major source of information, I employed an element of the ethnographic method, i.e., participant observation. I was lucky

enough to attend an annual meeting of shareholders in 2013, as well as a couple of union gatherings in the Kochkor-Ata case. During my final trip to the town, I visited labour brigades located around various deposits and was able to engage with them about politics and the mobilization of workers. In Aral, I attended a number of village gatherings, which had been organized to listen to matters concerning mining activities. Observations of instances of collective deliberation and (non-) decision-making provided a better understanding of dynamics and processes *in situ*.

I also collected available written materials. For example, in Aral, I managed to get hold of an important file created by the leader of the anti-mining resistance, which consisted of 90 pages of protocols of village meetings and decisions, excerpts from national legislation and international norms governing environmental protection. In Kochkor-Ata, I was unable to review court documentation concerning the legal struggle between the labour force and their various opponents. I was also denied access to official materials of the parliamentary committee hearings in both cases, because it would require too much bureaucratic time spent on finding them in the archive.¹⁸⁴ However, I used other sources of official information available to the public, such as small reports by the Kyrgyzstani Government and Parliament. Though they did not provide major analytical value, these materials were nonetheless helpful, as they illuminated additional information about the activities of resistance movements. It was striking, for example, to discover that protest groups on the periphery had tried extremely hard to establish legal and political connections with the centre by bypassing local official channels such as village and town authorities. In a Western context, social movements that work towards changing institutions and policies deal with local decision-making bodies in the first place and rarely reach out to higher echelons of power.

¹⁸⁴ During the period between 2010 and 2011, the Kyrgyzstani Parliament did not yet have an electronic database.

3.4. Difficulties on the ground

Each immersion within local politics brings about its own complexities and limitations. The difficulties I faced during my fieldwork were related to access to the field in general, as well as access to sources of information in particular. Some of these challenges were related to events directly but some emerged as a result of my own position as a female young researcher of Kyrgyz origin. My professional and personal identity had a direct impact on my involvement in local political life. Thus in the initial phase of my involvement in Aral, I was typically perceived as an 'agent' working for foreign firms. The profession of a scientific researcher is not well known among ordinary citizens and is often confused with other professions such as journalism or spying as mentioned earlier. I had a hard time explaining to my interviewees why someone would be genuinely interested in a small locale for scientific purposes only. I might have convinced some but others remained suspicious towards my 'investigative' activities until the end. On the other hand, being Kyrgyz and a young woman helped me gaining access to various informants including youth and women. I had an impression that after the initial challenge of bridging suspicion and gaining some sort of trust of informants my gender and ethnicity allowed me to create with them relations based on confidentiality. These interviewees opened up with their concerns because I was someone who could understand their worries much quicker than a foreign researcher and much better than a man. Finally, as someone coming from the 'centre' I was often perceived as a representative of central decision-making institutions, whatever that meant to them. In saying what was on their minds, they often urged me 'to pass the message to people who take decisions up there.' This pressing need to be heard and listened to made me a kind of confidant for some of my informants.

Studying community-based mobilization turned out to be much more difficult compared to researching labour-based mobilization. When I first began gathering data in Aral village in the summer of 2012, I became associated with the mining company against which the community acted out violently in 2011. This

translated for some time into complications regarding gaining access to the field. When I returned a year later, I was able to conduct interviews and attend meetings without experiencing tensions on the part of respondents. However, because of opaque networks of power relations, it was challenging to identify and get into contact with several sources of information. In addition, my investigation in this area was to some extent limited by the sudden death in 2013 of a major actor of resistance, the then head of the village council, as well as the removal of another important player, the then director of a local school. Residents considered both these individuals as chief forces behind the violent attacks against the mining firm.

In Kochkor-Ata, the identification of sources was challenging due to the so-called 'brokers' or 'activists' who, among other functions, served as gatekeepers of information. The danger of focusing research on such activists is linked to the fact that they are well trained in terms of speaking to the mass media and political observers. They astutely manipulate anti-elite and anti-state discourses to, for example, give an impression of being situated, in Marxist terms, within a perfect labour struggle. Such an initial impression will no doubt be a positive surprise against the background of a neo-liberal economy. Yet if one does not move beyond this level of labour representation, a great deal of inner workings of resistance will be missed. Therefore, after using snowball sampling in the initial stage of inquiry for both case studies, I expanded my primary contacts to gradually include a wider number of resources. At the end of my inquiry, I had gathered quite a variety of interviewees, ranging from ordinary participants to individuals in leading positions; this allowed me to draw a more comprehensive 'map' of local actors.

Finally, in both areas, I conducted fieldwork in the aftermath of major events. This presented some challenges for the research. Since interviewees were not immediately focused on the particular phenomena under investigation, the reconstruction of events was subjected to peculiar processes. In Aral, for

example, the passage of two years did not lead to the convergence of narratives; individuals indicated a lack of a unified narrative regarding past events. In addition, the legacy of violence was still present, since individuals often expressed annoyance and a lack of interest or patience when reminded of violent actions that had taken place in the past. In Kochkor-Ata, in contrast I had to deal with the crystallization of a unified discourse among the workers. In order to unpack this homogenous narrative, I conducted interviews with workers in different ranks, from heads of departments to ordinary drillers, and sometimes conducted several interviews with the same person in a bid to better understand details about the history of mobilization.

In this chapter of the dissertation, I presented the conceptual framework that I intend to apply in the forthcoming empirical chapters. I outlined a number of initial propositions that will be submitted to further empirical analysis and re-discussed in the chapter on the comparative interpretation of empirical findings. I also explained my methodological procedure, that is, the methods I will be using and the selection of case studies. I complemented my explanation of the methodology by providing examples of the difficulties I experienced in gaining access to the field and to quantitative data, problems that many researchers face in Kyrgyzstan. The dissertation now passes to the discussion of empirical material.

CHAPTER IV: LABOUR-BASED MOBILIZATION IN KOCHKOR-ATA TOWN

I. Introduction

Blocking the roads and storming the state institutions is a last option for us. You see, laws don't work and formal complaints and official letters are inefficient. Only by staging protests can we make sure to grab the attention of authorities. In other words, it's *politics*. In the past, workers weren't able to do politics.

People's Defence Committee, Kochkor-Ata

The above is how the Head of the People's Defence Committee, Ondurush Zamanov, explained the four-year mobilization of workers in his town of Kochkor-Ata, located in the southern agrarian province of Jalal-Abad. For the workers of the state company Kyrgyzneftegaz, mobilization began when a segment of their work collective, *kollektiv* – in Russian, seized a revolutionary moment on 8 April 2010 to oust the incumbent Company Director, Iskhak Pirmatov. This large group of workers, supported by the local branch of the political party Ata-Meken, accused Pirmatov of corruption and regime cooptation. While this event created confusion among the remaining workers, the group formed the 'Movement for Truth' (*Chyndyk uchun kyimyl*), which would structure their subsequent mobilizations against various central decision-makers and the company's policies in the future.

The goals of the Movement for Truth were not immediately obvious. Reacting to revolutionary changes in the capital, the group that ousted the director was preoccupied with the struggle against 'elite corruption'. As such, events unfolded here were similar to what Sarah Ashwin described for the case of post-independent Russia, where mining workers had shown more interest for electing or dismissing their directors and less so for fixing labour problems.¹⁸⁵ In the case of the remote 'mono-town' Kochkor-Ata, this intersection of political and economic interests at the heart of a state-owned company served as the beginning of my empirical puzzle.

¹⁸⁵ Ashwin, S. (1999) 'Redefining the collective: Russian mineworkers in transition', in Burawoy, M. and Verdery, K. (ed.) *Uncertain transition: Ethnographies of change in the postsocialist world*, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.

Given the extent of de-industrialization, labour-based mobilizations have been rare in the post-1991 period in Kyrgyzstan. Only a few examples of this type of industrial conflict occurred in the remaining scanty coal, railway and cotton sectors during the first post-revolutionary period between 2005 and 2006. Some of these conflicts were clearly power-oriented such as the occupation of the Kara-Keche coal mine by the notorious leader Nurlan Motuev, the so-called 'King of Coal'. Other examples include 'real' labour struggles that contested unpaid wages and human rights violations. One such known case involved the independent Union for the Protection of Railway Workers (UPRW), which fought against the company's management and the official, 'pocket' trade union from 2004 to 2006. Matthew Naumann and Burul Usmanalieva made a rare illustration of the success of this labour engagement against the system of power. Following two years of protests, the UPRW succeeded in receiving compensation for late payments, as well as the payment of debts to workers.¹⁸⁶

In Kochkor-Ata, growing union membership and an impressive record of victories against central politics after four years of political engagement situates my example of the mobilization of gas and oil workers on the successful side, too. Given the background of the continuous disintegration of political and social structures, and the relatively weak sustainability of protest movements in Kyrgyzstan, this case offers significant potential for studying a successful example of enduring practices of contestation.

Using the social construction of protests approach, the objective of this empirical chapter is to explore the complex intersection of political and economic relations at the heart of the workers' Movement for Truth. My study covers the period from April 2010 to January 2015 as the principal period of contestation between rebel

¹⁸⁶ Naumann, M. and Usmanalieva, B. (2008) 'Organizing railway workers and land migrants: Another side of civil society in the Kyrgyz Republic', *INTRAC Central Asia: Social movements case studies*, [Online], Available at: <http://www.intrac.org/data/files/resources/645/Social-Movements-and-Conflict-in-Post-Revolution-Kyrgyzstan.pdf> [15 July 2015].

workers and the central system of power. To present this material, the chapter is divided into two in-depth sections. In the first part, I present key aspects of the Movement for Truth by investigating the structure of leadership and membership, grievances and the forms of mobilization the movement has employed to politicize workers' concerns to central authorities. On the one hand, I draw attention to the fact that during the early stages of the formation of mobilization, neither leadership nor membership had a clear structure and uncontested legitimacy. On the other hand, I show that the initially fragmented labour force has nevertheless produced an impressive volume of mobilization.

In the second part of the chapter, I attempt to resolve this contradiction by delving deeper into the complex dynamics that are accountable for the success of mobilization. First, I show workers' active engagement with the central system of power via learning process that involves a blame attribution dilemma. I demonstrate how they have gradually 'professionalized' their strategies and tactics of protest-making as a result of this process. Second, I describe the so-called 'brokers' or opportunist workers, whose activities had a detrimental effect on the integrity of mobilization. Third, I link consolidation of the labour movement, despite brokers' actions, to *group processes*, on which I elaborated in Chapter III. Here, I stress the salience of the chief group process, monitoring, by which participants of initial episodes of mobilization and the local audience established trust in the organizers of mobilization and their proposed agenda. I then demonstrate how workers strengthened their movement via collective decision-making mechanisms. Finally, I put forward that workers further developed a sense of belonging to a collective agency and nurtured a belief in the success of collective action via collective empowerment. In sum, these group processes that emerged within the labour movement allowed establishing internal trust that helped to streamline the internal structure of leadership and membership, and to overcome the demobilizing effects of central politics, as well as the destructive activities of so-called opportunist 'brokers'. However, before turning to these issues, it is useful to consider the circumstances of the state company, as well as

the political circumstances under which the conflict between former company's management and workers erupted on 8 April, 2010.

1.1. State-owned industry

Exploration activities in Kyrgyzstan began in 1930s when coal, mercury, lead, copper, and oil were found in the country but only few plants were constructed since most of the volume of extracted minerals was processed in other parts of the Soviet Union.¹⁸⁷ The Soviets have made significant investments in Kyrgyzstani mining and metallurgical sectors. According to Bogdetsky et al., up to 50 million roubles had been invested each year in the exploration of minerals and the mining industry employed approximately 50 000 workers. However, following the country's independence the role of industry declined in the country's GDP: in 2010, its contribution was 28% in which manufacturing including gold production was 17.8% only.¹⁸⁸

Assessing the impact of the disintegration of Soviet industry in neighbouring Kazakhstan, Catherine Alexander found that the dismantlement of existing transport, supply and distribution networks led to the devaluation of industrial enterprises.¹⁸⁹ To this we can add implications for the organization of workers, i.e., unions. In the Soviet era, trade unions were created as completely different organizations for the purpose of a completely different political economy (Crowley, 2004). Charles Buxton writes the following about informal Kyrgyzstani workers' actions and the trade unions in current conditions:

After 1991 the trade unions rapidly lost members as public-sector employment plummeted. Unofficial workers' actions [were] an embarrassment to labor movement bureaucrats who had never led strikes in the Soviet period and who remained tied up in defensive "social partnership" mechanisms, hanging on to gains inherited from the previous

¹⁸⁷ *World Bank Report No. 13024-KG*, (1994) Kyrgyz Republic: Mining Sector Review.

¹⁸⁸ *National Statistics Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic*, (2012) [Online], Available at: <http://www.stat.kg> [24 Aug 2013].

¹⁸⁹ Alexander, C. (2004) 'Values, relations and changing bodies: Industrial privatization in Kazakhstan', in Humphrey, C. and Verdery, K. (ed.) *Property in Question: Value transformation in the Global Economy*, Oxford: Berg.

period.¹⁹⁰

Kochkor-Ata is located in the southern agrarian province of Jalal-Abad, 56 km from the provincial centre of Jalal-Abad, west of the Uzbekistan border. It was established in 1952, when the Izbaskent oil source was discovered and was granted the status of town in 2003.¹⁹¹



Figure 1: Location of Kochkor-Ata town, Jalal-Abad Province, Southern Kyrgyzstan.

The Kyrgyzneftegaz company, where the conflict unfolded the day after the April Revolution, is located in the Kochkor-Ata's centre. Those who visit the company's headquarters will observe a city-like infrastructure, most of which had been built in the Soviet era, and which is lacking in other sites in rural areas. Paved roads, solid buildings and sufficient social facilities stand out of the usual sadness of other provincial towns.

¹⁹⁰ Buxton, Ch. (2011), p. 88.

¹⁹¹ There are 6 out of 22 towns and 14 out of 29 urban-type communities that were founded in the areas of mineral extraction. See Bogdetsky, V., Stavinskiy, V., Shukurov, E. and Suyunbaev, M. (2001) 'The mining industry and sustainable development in Kyrgyzstan', *Mining, Minerals and Sustainable Development*, no. 110, November.

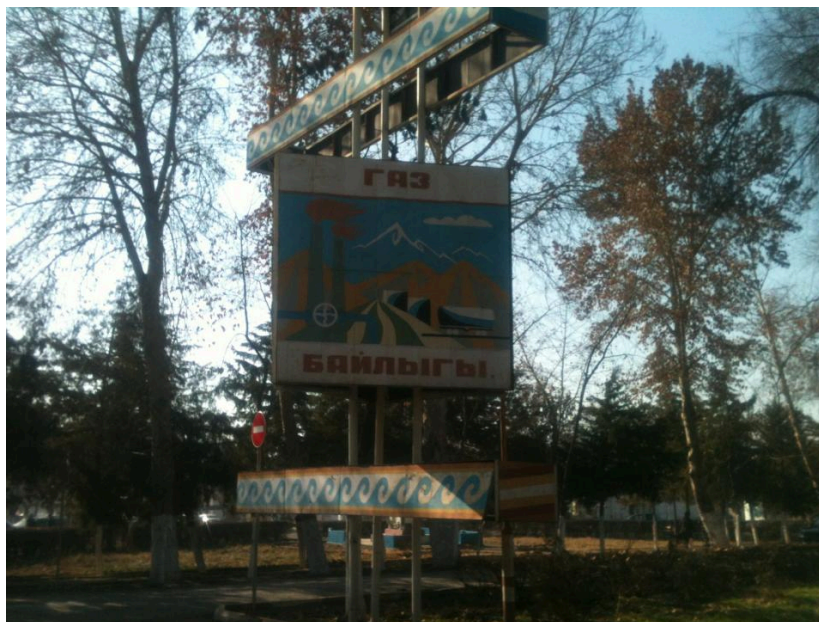


Figure 2: 'Gas wealth' – Kochkor-Ata town, Kyrgyzneftegaz headquarters
(© Asel Doolotkeldieva).

The company has the special status of 'state's strategic assets' (*gosudarstvennye strategicheskie ob'ekty*)¹⁹² and employs approximately 2500 people out of 14 814 town residents (2009).¹⁹³ Ownership of the company belongs predominantly to the state: 85.16% of shares are owned by the state; the remaining 10% belongs to another state agency – the Social Fund – and less than 5% are divided among employees of the company. Although the country's oil reserves do not exceed 89 million tonnes and approximately 26 billion cubic meters of gas,¹⁹⁴ the company is involved in a full cycle that includes exploration, the extraction of crude oil and associated gas, as well as the transportation and refining of petroleum products. Locally produced gas covers partial needs of the Jalal-Abad and Osh Provinces: in 2013, the company produced 77 000 tonnes of oil and 25 million cubic meters of gas. According to 2004 statistics, the

¹⁹² Together with 50 other objects, the company represents one of the state holdings in strategic areas of energy, natural resources, defence and economy, among others.

¹⁹³ *Wikipedia*, [Online], Available at: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kochkor-Ata> [20 March 2015].

¹⁹⁴ 'Obchie geologicheskie zapasy gasa ocenili 26 mlrd kubometrov' [Overall geological gas reserves are estimated to 26 billion cubic metres], *Vecherny Bishkek* (26 October 2012), Available at: http://www.vb.kg/doc/203987_obshie_geologicheskie_zapasy_gaza_ocenili_v_26_mlrd_kybometrov.html [29 June 2015].

Kyrgyzneftegaz company contributed 96.2% to the town's GDP.¹⁹⁵ In 2012 and 2013, it contributed 1 billion 410 million som to the national budget.¹⁹⁶

The Kyrgyzneftegaz company is an inherent part of the town's identity. Workers expressed pride when talking about their company and profession. Many of them have been employed there for over 30 years and participated in the establishment of the industry and local settlements. The so-called 'workers' settlements' (*rabochie gorodki*) near the main gas rigs are still populated by employees. Presently, the company offers a wide range of social services. These include a kindergarten for employees' children, a college that offers industry-related specializations for school graduates, a sports complex – one of the best equipped in the south of the country– a recreational hospital, opportunities for recreational activities at Lake Issik-kul for youngsters and adults¹⁹⁷ and concessions for using gas and electricity, among others. Such services are aimed at supporting social interaction against a backdrop of decreasing social integrative structures in rural areas of post-independent Kyrgyzstan.¹⁹⁸

Bogdetsky et al. write about the Soviet urbanization of extractive areas:

Towns were built, infrastructure developed, and the supply of goods and services improved. This was largely the result of the creation of new jobs and incomparably high salaries, the opportunity for education and a relatively well developed service sector. The network of schools, day nurseries and kindergartens, specialised secondary education schools, health care, cultural institutions, and the provision of public transport and communication were all included in the construction and development plans of mining companies.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁵ Association of municipalities of the Kyrgyz Republic, [Online], Available at: <http://www.citykr.kg/kochkorata.php>, [3 March 2015].

¹⁹⁶ 'Pribyl Kyrgyzneftegaza viroslo v 25 raza za tri goda' [Kyrgyzneftegaz's profit increased by 25 times in three years], *Vecherny Bishkek* (9 September 2013), Available at: http://www.vb.kg/doc/242470_pribyl_kyrgyzneftegaza_vyroslo_v_25_raz_za_tri_goda.html [22 March 2015].

¹⁹⁷ Issik-kul is the country's most renowned recreational area. In the Soviet era, unions and large companies used to have their own sanatoriums here.

¹⁹⁸ According to statistics, Kochkor-Ata town hosts nine non-governmental organizations, five mosques, four trade bazars and 66 small and medium enterprises. See Association of municipalities of the Kyrgyz Republic, [Online], Available at: <http://www.citykr.kg/kochkorata.php> [3 March 2015].

¹⁹⁹ Bogdetsky et al. (2001).

Far from implying that this social infrastructure mechanically procures specific pre-conditions for the development of labor insurgency, an inadvertent comparison with other rural and semi-urban areas, where such infrastructure has collapsed in the post-independence period, nevertheless reveals the more advantageous position of Kochkor-Ata workers in terms of access to organizational and cultural resources.

1.2. Local pre-revolutionary context and the chronology of major events in Kochkor-Ata

Notwithstanding the feeling of pride regarding their production, some workers have been concerned about the fate of their company in the hands of a crony regime of the Bakievs. On 8 April 2010, these workers instigated a management takeover. On that day, following major political changes in the capital, several localized changes in power occurred in provinces, towns and villages. The specificity of Jalal-Abad Province also adds to this structure of political opportunities. The president Kurmanbek Bakiev's native village is located in Jalal-Abad Province; prior to the revolution, the local situation was understood to be under the control of Akhmat Bakiev, one of the president's brothers. From his company's local office Saly-Ata, Akhmat Bakiev had allegedly been influencing political decisions in the province. According to local politicians and officials, the then structure of the Jalal-Abad city council had largely been a result of his personal arrangement.²⁰⁰

Besides the fiefdom of the Bakievs, another major factor was involved – organized crime. The day after the revolution, criminal groups took advantage of the power change and were able to take hold of political and economic positions within the province. Both state and private property were appropriated. A large number of local councils were dissolved and village authorities were overthrown. Rival groups competed for the control of these local power structures in order to

²⁰⁰ Interviews with the former mayor of Jalal-Abad city and a local journalist, Jalal-Abad, December 2011.

gain access to land and commodity markets. According to the then governor of Jalal-Abad Province, approximately 20 assets that were in Akhamt Bakiev's possession in Jalal-Abad Province are still being disputed by various actors, including criminal groups.²⁰¹

Opposing the regime of Bakievs, opposition parties such as Ata-Meken and SDPK were active in the province in the form of small cells and informal regional networks. Ata-Meken's local hold was recognized, for example, in the person of the party chairman's brother, Asylbek Tekebaev. The local branches of these parties were involved in the takeover of management at Kochkor-Ata on April 8, 2010.

Following these events participants of the take-over of management formed the 'Movement for Truth' (*Chyndyk uchun kyimyl*), within which a series of important mobilizations were organized during the period between 2010 and 2015 covered in this thesis. As a first step since the change of management, the movement initiated the election of the 'people's' management (*narodnoe upravlenie*) that would respond to workers' needs and rights.

This election was not a straightforward procedure as multiple groups among workers supported alternative candidates. There is almost no information in mass media or in official reports since the event took place in the immediate post-revolutionary chaotic period. Some of these groups were responding to political patrons located in Bishkek. For example, one group emerged within the department of transport, one of the biggest departments of the company employing more than 500 employees. The head of department, Kenesh Masirov, who was coopted by the outgoing director Pirmatov organized his subordinates to advance his own candidacy. Another group promoted the candidacy of Rinat

²⁰¹ See 'Bektur Asanov: Esli v Kyrgyzstane budet prosvetat' korrupcia i reiderstvo, ne minovat tretiei revoliucii' [Bektur Asanov: If corruption and raiding continue thriving in Kyrgyzstan, there will be a third revolution], *The Kyrgyz Committee for Human Rights* (20 April 2011), Available at: <http://www.kchr.org/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=2291> [20 January 2014].

Makenov, proposed by the Ministry of Nature. Other smaller groups emerged within various departments supporting or rejecting these candidates. The Movement for Truth supported the candidacy of Kanybek Masirov, a respected manager with more than 20 years of experience in the oil industry, who was then officially appointed by the Provisional Government as an interim CEO on April 15, 2010.

The movement consisted of various actors and included not only the company's employees but also members of opposition parties Ata-Meken and SDPK, the People's Defence Committee, the local trade union and the new management. The local union was created in 1970s and performed along established Soviet functions whereas the People's Defence Committee was a new organization formed prior to the April revolution. After the election, the new management also became part of the Movement for Truth. Thus the movement became an alliance of mixed forces (both labor and political) that were in opposition to the regime and the Director Pirmatov. In subsequent mobilizations, workers and the new management acted in union against external opponents. This is an interesting feature to note because unlike other labor conflicts that usually involve confrontation between workers and the management, our case relates to the fight of united workers and the management against external political actors.

Besides this post-revolutionary union between the management and the employees, other actors are also worth mentioning, i.e. the political parties. Some press reports suggested that the change of management was a result of elite manipulation rather than a grassroots mobilization of workers. Such interpretations were influenced by several evidences of the implication of opposition parties at the workplace. Firstly, some employees were already connected to opposition parties as members of their local cells prior to the revolution. Second, the brother of the Ata-Meken party's chair, Asylbek Tekebaev, was allegedly directly involved in taking control of the Kyrgyzneftegaz company on 8 April, 2010. This move helped encroaching the party's hold on the

town and securing significant votes in subsequent elections. Third, at the moment of electing the new management and the board of directors, the party has succeeded to appoint the majority of candidates.²⁰² For example, Kanybek Masirov is believed to be the Tekebaev's appointee. Although most of the interviewed workers said that the new CEO was genuinely popular among the workforce, others pointed to the fact that he was appointed by the Ata-Meken party that came to power after the revolution. Other members of management and the board of directors had affiliation with the SDPK party, which was leading the coalition government during the period between 2010 and 2011. Still others claimed their political neutrality, like the new chair of the board of directors, Aman Omurzakov, who was replaced in 2013 by a person loyal to SDPK party.

Upon election, the new management raised workers' wages and increased social benefits. In addition to these popular measures, new techniques were designed and introduced for a greater level of management transparency. Management established regular meetings that were aimed at informing workers of production processes. They also installed an 'information board' at the company's headquarters that displayed daily changes in primary production indicators. Anyone could access this board and receive information about the company's

²⁰² According to the national legislation on joint-stock companies, candidates for the board of directors are selected through an open competition of civil servants. A state commission formed by the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic carries out the selection of candidates. Upon recommendation of the commission, the Prime Minister makes a decision on the nomination of civil servants. The Fund of State Property under the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic presents the candidates to the board of directors at the general meeting of shareholders. The general meeting of shareholders then elects the board. See *Postanovlenie Pravitelstva Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki 'Poryadok otbora i vidvijenja gosudarstvennih slujachih v sostav soveta direktorov akcionernogo obchestva, sozdannogo v ramkah gosudarstvenno-chastnogo partnerstva' №323*, (27 May, 2009) [Decree of the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic 'Order of selection and promotion of civil servants to the board of directors of the company, created through public-private partnerships']. However, since the inception of the parliamentary system in 2010, parties have informally divided state agencies and state assets among themselves and exert a direct influence over nominations. The author's interview with the former Chair of the Board Of Directors of Kyrgyzneftegaz, Bishkek, September 2013. See also Akipress's chart on the general informal distribution of state resources among five political parties in the aftermath of the formation of the coalition government, 'New Coalition in Kyrgyzstan Already Discredited before Forming the Government', *Central Asia Memory Blog* (17 December 2010), Available at: <http://alexdockg.wordpress.com/2010/12/17/new-coalition-in-kyrgyzstan-already-discredited-before-forming-the-government/> [14 June 2015].

performance, including the amount of drilled gas and oil, their prices on the market, etc. Even employees who worked in areas not related to production, such as the college or kindergarten, were well informed of these indicators. To continue increasing transparency, the new management also committed itself to eliminating corruption schemes established previously by the Director Pirmatov and thus gain trust among workers as a management free of corruption. Together with members of the Movement for Truth management launched an internal investigation of the largest corruption case that involved the purchase of Chinese equipment. They formed a delegation that traveled to China to investigate and later disputed the lawfulness of the purchase agreement achieved by Pirmatov in the court. The investigation of this case brought the newly established management and the divided workforce together and strengthened the Movement for Truth.

Yet, the post-revolutionary conflict at the company did not end with the change of management alone. Following parliamentary elections in October 2010, a part of the old elite, including the ousted Director Iskhak Pirmatov, was propelled to the national parliament. To make things worse, following the formation of the Coalition Government in early 2011 and offices being informally divided amongst parties, the Kyrgyzneftegaz state company was taken over by Iskhak Pirmatov's political party, Respublica. This happened because the important Fund of State Property, which manages all state assets including that of Kyrgyzneftegaz, was 'conferred' to the Respublica party.

Led by Respublica, the Fund rapidly acted to remove the Ata-Meken affiliated management and to appoint a new board loyal to the Respublica party. Starting from January 2011, the Fund has effectuated repeated attempts to unseat the current management. On 26 April, 2011 the Fund made a step of calling an extraordinary general meeting of shareholders with the aim of forcing the management to resign. Backed up by the employees, the management decided to resist to these attempts and made an appeal to the Bishkek inter-district court

to recognize the Fund's actions of convening the general meeting unlawful. After an unsuccessful exchange of court litigations between the management and the Fund, employees decided to resort to demonstrations and strikes.

Starting from 4 March, 2011 workers organized large protests in Kochkor-Ata town involving more than 2000 workers each, an exceptionally big number for Kyrgyzstani protests. They opposed the Fund's attempt to appoint a new board of directors against the will of workers. Protests took place on 19 April, 28 April and 30 May, 2011. During this series of demonstrations, workers presented a list of demands to the government, promising to resort to unrest if they were not met. The demands included the following: 1) the then Prime Minister, Almazbek Atambaev, was invited to assess the lawfulness of the Fund's decision for calling an extraordinary meeting to change the board of directors; 2) should the Prime Minister make an unfair or unlawful decision, workers would begin indefinite striking; 3) in case of the non-execution of the first condition, they would block the Bishkek-Osh highway.²⁰³ Responding to these threats of unrest, the Prime Minister Atambaev visited Kochkor-Ata in June 2011 and resulting from negotiations with employees appointed an 'external' manager, i.e. a manager above the party influence.

Taking this example of fight against the central institution as a success of workers' mobilization, the Movement for Truth enlarged the scope of its engagement with central policies and their repertoire of collective action. Along with organizing protest demonstrations in Kochkor-Ata, the movement also began launching contentious actions in the capital. During the period between 2010 and 2012 they protested in front of the Parliament, Government House, the Supreme Court and a range of different ministries to address such various issues as the corruption involving the former Director Pirmatov, litigations against the Fund of State Property and as previously noted, the purchase of Chinese equipment.

²⁰³ This highway is the only road connecting the north and south of the country.

Besides the 'unconventional' ways of channeling their concerns and disagreement, members of the movement employed a wide range of 'conventional' channels. They organized numerous press conferences as a way to inform wider society of elite manipulations at the company. The movement also sought to meet with a wide range of government officials and politicians including the head of the then Provisional Government, Rosa Otunbaeva. Finally they lobbied for the opening of a criminal case against the former Director (now MP) Pirmatov and for the vote to levy Pirmatov's immunity in Parliament. Aided by the Ata-Meken party, they made their way into Parliament and held private talks with more than 70 MPs.

Back home, at the end of 2013 and the beginning of 2014, the movement staged a series of protests in Jalal-Abad and Kochkor-Ata towns to contest the government's decision to split an oil refinery located in Jalal-Abad away from the company. As a result of these successful demonstrations, the oil refinery remained the company's balance. Overall, between 2010 and 2015 the movement organized more than 35 demonstrations and strikes.

By the end of my research, early 2015, the Movement for Truth had consolidated itself despite interventions of multiple political forces and internal divisions. The local union grew to attract new members even outside of the company. The People's Defence Committee was progressively sidelined because some of its members tried to conduct informal negotiations with the central government that opposed the movement's official agenda. The union subsequently became the movement's chief official representative. The union established a well functioning routine within the company that permitted employees to influence the management's decisions. One mechanism of such collective decision-making was the organization of regular general meetings. Thus, every important decision made by the management had to be consulted with and approved by all brigades. Other mechanisms empowered employees to feel part of a bigger

collective. Finally, their impressive record of victories bolstered members' belief in collective action and attracted many more individuals to join the movement.

II. Key Aspects of the Movement for Truth: Grievances, Structure of Leadership and Membership, and Forms of Mobilization

In this part of the chapter, I begin exploring the take-over of management that grew into the Movement for Truth. I will start with a description and analysis of the movement's main features: grievances and concerns; the structure of leadership and membership, and the forms of mobilization or local 'repertoire of collective action' that was employed during a four-year engagement against central politics. While exploring these dynamics, in the spirit of Wendy Welford, I do not 'edit out' things that 'spoil' the image of movements as cohesive organizations with a satisfactory 'progression' towards success.²⁰⁴ On the contrary, I show that the workers' goals, strategies and tactics were constantly being constructed; I do not intentionally minimize the salience of the fragmented structure of the movement in order to present the collective as a unified front. I demonstrate that the fragmented structure of the movement presented rather precarious conditions, but nonetheless did not hinder the development of mobilization of workers. I will begin by providing a picture of workers' grievances and concerns that links the history of their mono-town, central elites and politics to feelings of dispossession and injustice.

2.1. Grievances and concerns: corruption, injustice, employment

The conventional social movement literature focuses on the ideological expression of social mobilizations inasmuch as grievances are clearly attributed either to inequalities (American school) or new identities (European new social movement school). In Kyrgyzstan, the picture is much more blurred as the analysis of grievances is complicated not only on the content level but also on the form. The understanding of the ideological content is problematic because the ways in which protest groups formulate and frame their

²⁰⁴ Welford, W. (2010).

concerns/disagreements/demands, or the ways in which they are portrayed by mass media dramatically distort the public image of protesters. As a result, protest groups often fail to send a clear message regarding their political position as a first means for gaining public support.

In my case, in addition to 'negative' media interpretations, the workers' own formulation of grievances as a 'Movement for Truth' was too ambiguous to assist in understanding its objectives at the outset. To gain a better understanding, one therefore has to delve deeply into the stories that link local history to central politics. These stories help to show how corruption becomes workers' primary concern, as well as how such formulation reflects the movement's goals. Consider the following concise opinion of a worker who has been employed at the company for more than 30 years and who viewed the situation at the onset of their mobilization as follows:

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russians left and it was our responsibility to save the company from bankruptcy or privatization. In the beginning of 2010 we faced several challenges: worn-out equipment, accidents and injuries, an impoverished working class, elite predation, and weak law enforcement. That was our situation. We decided that it was a moment for the working class to take matters into their own hands.²⁰⁵

Alongside this general state of affairs at the company, it appears that former Company Director, Iskhak Pirmatov gave rise to feelings of injustice and dispossession amongst company workers. In 2010, Iskhak Pirmatov's monthly salary was equal to a specialist's annual salary: while the Director earned 102 272 som per month (2000 USD), a geologist earned 9492 som (less than 200 USD) and a manual worker (*raznorabochy*) 5306 som only (100 USD). Iskhak Pirmatov also maintained a significant gap between workers and heads of departments. Thus, under his management, the head of the Technological Transport Department received a monthly salary of 75 226 som (1500 USD), whereas a manual worker in this department earned only 5705 som (100

²⁰⁵ Interview with the Head of the local union, Akynbek Raimkulov, Kohckor-Ata, December 2014.

USD).²⁰⁶ In addition to this perceived unjust distribution of benefits, workers were unhappy with Iskhak Pirmatov's arbitrary firing practices. He made redundant many employees who disagreed with his policies. This arbitrary management was especially regarded as illegitimate in light of the fact that Iskhak Pirmatov himself lacked the professional credibility needed to run such a specialized company. According to workers, he was appointed to a high-end position with no previous experience in the oil industry, thus breaching organizational coherence, professional valorization and meritocracy. Being a '*neftyannik*' (oilman) is a precondition for any *nachalnik* (boss) in this sphere of production and is an integral part of workers' identity. As many interviewers stated, he 'was not one of ours, not a *neftyannik*'.²⁰⁷

In addition to low wages and uncertain employment, Iskhak Pirmatov was allegedly involved in the so-called 'corruption schemes' that served the Bakievs' crony regime. According to these allegations, Iskhak Pirmatov employed complex informal deals and offshore jurisdictions that robbed the company and its workers of significant incomes.²⁰⁸ Workers feared that Pirmatov could have used his political connections and fake companies to privatize the company in favour of the regime's cronies. Rumours about a forthcoming privatization were circulating in relevant circles in Bishkek and were a source of worker anxieties during the period 2010 to 2011. A female respondent explained the centrality of this state company to life in their town thus:

There are no other jobs in the town... Our families depend on our employment. Only the children of workers are recruited into the factory; we

²⁰⁶ See *Pravitelstvo Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki. Rasporyajenie ot 05.09.2011* [Government of Kyrgyz Republic. Order from 05.09.2011], [Online], Available at: <http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/211207?cl=ru-ru#p1> [29 June 2015].

²⁰⁷ Interview with an employee, Kochkor-Ata, November 2012.

²⁰⁸ These allegations led the new government to open a special inter-ministerial commission to investigate the financial situation of the company. On 30 December, 2011, on the basis of the commission's findings, the General Prosecution filed a criminal case against Pirmatov in accord with the following articles of the Criminal Code: 'Causing damage to property by fraud or breach of trust' and 'Abuse of authority by the employees of commercial or other organizations'. According to the General Prosecution, Pirmatov caused the state damage equal to more than 258 MLN som (approx. 5 MLN USD) during the period from 2009 to 2010.

don't accept strangers here. And we cannot allow our company to be led into bankruptcy and privatization.²⁰⁹

By the time the April Revolution occurred, Kyrgyzneftegaz employees stated that workers' discontent was high enough to instigate a means for removing Iskhak Pirmatov. Yet, mobilization against corruption should not be understood as a one-time action. Thus the Movement for Truth did not decline following the takeover and the rapid resolution of local labour issues, which saw wages increased and social packages already being enhanced in 2011. On the contrary, the development of the Movement saw the expansion of initial grievances and concerns in time, space and scope. Every new round of contestation engendered more claims of corruption to include new topics, new opponents and new geographic locations. At the end of my study in the beginning of 2015, the Movement was dealing with corruption of other members of elite, of courts and the central government. The evolution of initial concerns, which targeted primarily local conditions of employment, into the central political arena made it hard to understand whether this example was about economic and social inequalities, identity or politics. When asked what the Movement for Truth represented, an interviewee responded:

The whole system is corrupt: the parliament, the government, courts, all of it... We don't know where to go to get answers to our questions, which institutions to address, or who to consider accountable for wrongdoings. We are looking for truth and justice in one word.²¹⁰

The above quote highlights the movement's vague title, the meaning of which had not been obvious at the outset to external observers. It alludes to the context of general weak governance, in which it becomes difficult for social groups to formulate succinct demands.

2.2. Structure of 'initiators' and 'participants'

²⁰⁹ Interview with an employee, Kochkor-Ata, May 2013.

²¹⁰ Interview with an employee #1, Kochkor-Ata, November 2012.

The inquiry into the Movement for Truth continues with an analysis of the structure of leadership and membership. Leadership and membership are other ambiguous features of the Kyrgyzstani grassroots groups, because their performances appear so 'erratic' that these groups do not immediately manifest as having legitimate leadership, ideologically committed membership or being established organizations. This picture of 'chaotic' mobilizations can sometimes become worse in cases where mass media report about internal divisions and petty struggles for power within the movements themselves. Such reports can have real implications, as Kyrgyzstani public opinion is quick to react to such news by showing distrust towards weakly structured ephemeral movements with disputable leadership and cooptable membership. In Kochkor-Ata, the takeover of management gave rise to internal divisions among the workers that were fuelled by central elites and the outgoing Director Pirmatov. It therefore makes sense to take a closer look at this local arena in order to appreciate the uneasy development of the organization of labor insurgency.

After the Director Pirmatov was ousted, the workplace became an arena in which competing groups vied for domination. Although the Provisional Government, which was established in the aftermath of popular uprisings, appointed Kanybek Masirov as an interim CEO on 15 April 2010, some workers' groups contested his legitimacy. This internal competition began when the former Director Iskhak Pirmatov decided to effectuate a return to the company via workers who remained loyal to him. To this end, he co-opted the Head of the Transport Department, Kenesh Masirov, promising to appoint him to the board of management. The transport department is one of the biggest divisions in the company and employs approximately 600 people. Perhaps Iskhak Pirmatov did not expect that his cooptation of the head of the transport department would further lead to divisions within the department itself, as well as between this and other departments. Taking note of these cooptation possibilities, other departments began gathering their own workers with the objective of advancing their candidates for managerial positions. The contestation between departments

then took the form of small pickets in front of the company's headquarters in Kochkor-Ata. In an interview with the author, an employee described this situation as the continuation of the 'revolutionary fervour'.²¹¹ Groups of 100 individuals stood in different corners and scanted contradicting slogans that looked completely confusing to an external observer. While one group demanded appointing their own manager and removing the incumbent CEO, the second group simply demanded the opposite. To these, a third group was added, which disputed the candidacy of Rinat Makenov, who had allegedly 'parachuted' from Bishkek. In this way, the small public space that the town was able to offer became a place of contestation for too many competing claims:

- *Rinat Makenov ketsin!* (Out with Rinat Makenov!)
- *Kenesh Masirov ketsin!* (Out with Kenesh Masirov!)
- *Kanybek Masirov ketsin!* (Out with Kanybek Masirov!)

To make things worse, these groups accused one another of corruption and the embezzlement of funds using their own interpretations of the past, in which the heads of departments were involved as part of Iskhak Pirmatov's management. They gave contradictory interviews to national press, which rendered an understanding of events even more complex. Such pickets were obviously aimed at resolving a particular but important issue, i.e., the legitimacy of appointments. However, for an external observer, such a framing of protests was likely to signify a parochial competition for power in which too much focus was placed on positions and not on actual labour interests. During this period, workers who did not take part in the fight for power were significantly confused by ongoing events and feared that these internal fights would lead to the closure of the company. Those who became part of the Movement for Truth including ordinary workers, the local branch of Ata-Meken party, the local union, the People's Defence Committee, and the new management, were worried that Pirmatov might succeed in returning to the company via his party's control over the Fund. This

²¹¹ Interview with an employee #2, Kochkor-Ata, May 2013.

turmoil at Kyrghyzneftegas has endured for some time as central political parties have continued their attempts to get hold of the state company.

It took time for the new management to be accepted by all departments and for the Movement for Truth to become a legitimate structure of mobilization for workers. This short account is important for our analysis as it shows the complexity of 'mundane' conflicts in the formation of grassroots mobilizations. It also demonstrates that a social mobilization constitutes itself in the process even if some pre-existing networks, patronage relationships and identities are already established prior to it. Similar to Hirsch (1990), I believe conflict to be a critical dynamic that reshapes loyalties and beliefs. This type of observation led me to apply in my preliminary conceptualization (Chapter III) the terms 'initiators' and 'participants' instead of 'leaders' and 'members'. Neither the workers nor other actors constituted at this stage a clear structure of leaders and members of a labor movement. Initiators and participants highlight rather those precarious conditions in which a grassroots mobilization is formed. These complexities on the ground also put in question the easy readings of elite manipulation: internal divisions inside the *kollektiv* were too important for ascribing too much power to elites.

At this point, such a picture of blurred interests and exclusive claims led me to question whether these heterogeneous groups would be able to move forward as a united protest movement with a legitimate leadership and committed membership. This question became even more acute with the succession of the Director Pirmatov to the national parliament and the subsequent unexpected expansion of the local conflict. For rebels outside of Bishkek, this meant that not only did they have to deal with internal dynamics, but they also needed to be prepared for new complex and obscure developments in the centre. Thus, could a divided *kollektiv* withstand the challenges of an over-complex political system and its machinations? To seize a revolutionary opportunity is one thing, but to participate in a lasting engagement involving the complexities of central politics is

a different matter that requires more resources than those held when an improvised takeover of management took place. Expansion and politicization of the conflict necessitates a much more coherent organization of the social mobilization, with both leaders and members showing continued commitment to the cause. I will return to these intriguing questions in the second part of the current chapter; for now, I will continue describing the ways workers dealt with the sudden expansion of their local conflict and the ways they engaged with the central political system.

2.3. Forms of mobilization and the repertoire of collective action

This section presents various forms of mobilizations in which workers and the company's new management became involved between 2010 and 2014, despite the aforementioned challenges related to initial labour divisions and complex political connections with the centre. Although I keep the reader informed about the ways in which the workers' movement succeeded in overcoming these challenges only in the second part of the chapter, my objective here is to demonstrate the workers' significant capacity for collective action. Here, we will see that peaceful protests occupy a significant proportion of the workers' repertoire of collective action, but that these protests were also preceded and complemented by 'conventional' means such as legal actions, writing complaints and political lobbying. Again, we may not expect a weakly-formed peripheral movement to be capable of such creativity, resourcefulness and endurance, and this adds to the question regarding the conditions in which such a movement can eventually achieve victory. In the following, I draw on the most important instances of mobilization in a chronological order.

Gaining domestic legitimacy

At the time the takeover was effectuated and the new management was established the leaders behind the Movement for Truth were in need of a new *raison d'être* to continue its existence. Moreover, the continued co-optation of

workers by Pirmatov necessitated some action towards restoring integrity within the workplace and gaining a unanimous legitimacy for the new manager Kanybek Masirov. One way of achieving this was to convince the *kollektiv* about Pirmatov's wrongdoings. Together with the leaders of the Movement for Truth and resorting to the discourses about the struggle against elite corruption, the new management involved workers in investigating Pirmatov's notorious corruption schemes.²¹² This enterprise became successful in bringing workers, the union, the People's Defence Committee and the new management together. Resulting from this was legitimization of the forceful establishment of the new management, of the continuation of the Movement for Truth and the growing politicization of the *kollektiv*. Below I would like to give one example of this joint enterprise against corruption between the new management and workers.

One of these corruption cases concerned the production process, since it was related to the purchase of drilling equipment from China worth of 8.5 MLN USD.²¹³ The case was important, because it concerned the first new equipment ever bought by the company since the collapse of the Soviet Union and in the significant post-revolutionary slowdown of the economy, it was vital to launch new drilling sites and secure the extraction of at least 80 000-100 000 tonnes of oil annually. To carry out their investigation of the Chinese equipment, management put together a special delegation to China. In China, they established that equipment similar to what had been purchased cost only 3.7 MLN USD. The difference between the real price and that agreed upon by

²¹² A full list of financial violations between 2008 and 2011 can be found in the official *Zakluchenie Mejvedomstvennoi komissii po itogam revizii finansovo-hozaistvennoi deiatelnosti OAO 'Kyrgyzneftegaz' za period s 1 ianvaryaya 2008 goda po 1 uinya 2011 goda* [The conclusion of the Interdepartmental Commission for the audit of financial and economic activity of JSC 'Kyrgyzneftegaz' between 1 January 2008 and 1 June 2011], [Online], Available at: <http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/211207> [29 June 2015].

²¹³ General prosecution draws a map revealing Pirmatov's 'scheme' under which the drilling equipment was purchased, 'Genprokuratura ozvuchila detali korrupcionnoy shemy mejdu 'Kyrgyzneftegazom' i 'Unitrade Company' [General Prosecution announced details of the corruption scheme between 'Kyrgyzneftegaz' and 'Unitrade Company'], *Knews* (4 April 2012), Available at: http://www.knews.kg/action/13775_genprokuratura_ozvuchila_detali_korrupcionnoy_shemyi_mejdu_kyrgyzneftegazom_i_yunitreyd_kompani/ [29 June 2015].

Director Iskhak Pirmatov (4.8 MLN USD) was thus revealed and later publicized in mass media. In addition, the successful purchase of equipment from China at much lesser cost put a beginning to the impressive record of victories of the Movement for Truth.

Back in Kyrgyzstan, management filed a lawsuit to invalidate the purchase agreement with China previously reached by Iskhak Pirmatov. However, taking legal steps turned out to be problematic. After the inter-district Bishkek court turned down the lawsuit in August 2010, management filed a new lawsuit with the Bishkek city court, which in October 2010 made the decision to recognize the contract as null and void. Workers were mobilized alongside their managers and travelled in order to assist in court hearings held in the capital. These delegations pursued a special mission; neither management nor the workers trusted the justice system to be free and fair and as a result, their goal was to make a 'weighty' presence at the court hearings to put pressure on judges. As one participant of the delegation stated,

We wanted to show to judges that not only *chondor* (big men) had power; regular people did, too. We thought that in the presence of workers, judges would make a balanced decision.²¹⁴

To effect pressure on judges more effectively, they also organized pickets in front of the courts. Thus, groups of up to 100 workers were bussed to the capital on hearing days in the autumn of 2010. When on 17 December, 2010, the Supreme Court ruled to leave the decision of the Bishkek city court in effect, the workers' belief in their collective action grew even stronger. The outcome inferred that workers were powerful enough to have an effect on matters related to their positions. This was yet another important record in their long list of victories. As a side note, it can be mentioned that the decision to send workers to Bishkek to attend hearings was taken during one of the 'general meetings of the *kollektiv*, which became a regular feature of the movement's organization.²¹⁵ The travel

²¹⁴ Interview with a participant of a delegation to Bishkek, Kochkor-Ata, 2014.

²¹⁵ Protocol of the general meeting of the work collective no. 01/16, 17 November 2010.

expenses of workers who went to Bishkek were paid from the company's budget.²¹⁶

Defending the new management

While management and workers were attempting to get production on track via legal actions, the Fund of State Property (controlled by Respublica party and allegedly by the former Director Pirmatov) attempted to unseat the current management and replace it with a board of directors loyal to the Fund. This enacted the beginning of a new and unexpected round of contestation between the work *kollektiv* and the state agency. At the end of January 2011, the Fund decided to send a request to the acting board of directors to convene a general meeting of shareholders with the objective to elect a new board and a new executive. To exert stronger pressure on the acting management, the Fund mobilized other state agencies. Thus, in addition to the Fund's request, the Ministry of Nature requested to dismiss the acting management and to elect Rinat Makenov as the new executive. Other state agencies effected heavy checks on the company. According to a member of the People's Defence Committee, security services, customs, the audit chamber and parliamentary and inter-ministerial commissions made 26 checks in total.²¹⁷ Workers perceived these checks as a threat and attempted to demobilize their movement. To object to these checks, workers met inspectors from the centre in large crowds and the slogan *Kirgizbeibiz!* (We won't let you in!).

On 21 April 2011, when the Fund dismissed four out of five members of the board of directors, the remaining member made an appeal to the Bishkek inter-district court to recognize the Fund's actions of convening an extraordinary general meeting unlawful. However, the court left the claim unconsidered. The

²¹⁶ Some 271 000 som (approximately 50 000 USD) were allocated for 'traveling expenses' for this purpose; however, the investigation did not succeed in establishing the number of workers that were delegated to the hearings. See *Pravitelstvo Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki. Rasporyajenie ot 05.09.2011* [Government of Kyrgyz Republic. Order from 5 September 2011], [Online], Available at: <http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/211207?cl=ru-ru#p1> [29 June 2015].

²¹⁷ Interview with a member of the People's Defence Committee, Kochkor-Ata, May 2013.

appeal was further transferred to an inter-district court in Jalal-Abad Province. Regardless of these developments, on 26 April 2011, the Fund nonetheless convened a meeting of shareholders, during which a new board of directors and an executive were elected. From the workers' perspectives, this meeting and the ensuing election were unlawful, because they were not carried out in accordance with the national legislation on joint-stock companies.²¹⁸ Three days later, the Jalal-Abad inter-district court made a decision on the recognition of the meeting and of the new management, and considered both unlawful. However, the case was transferred back to the Bishkek inter-district court. This exchange of court appeals did not help to regulate the conflict, since court decisions were still pending at the time of this research.²¹⁹

In this instance, workers once again supported management's legal actions against the Fund. On 4 March, 2011, more than 2000 workers were mobilized in Kochkor-Ata, an exceptionally big number for Kyrgyzstani protests.²²⁰ They opposed the Fund's attempt to appoint a new board of directors against the will of workers.²²¹ Workers took to the streets on 19 April, 28 April and 30 May, 2011. During this series of demonstrations, workers presented a list of demands and promised to resort to unrest if they were not met. The demands included the following: 1) then Prime Minister, Almazbek Atambaev, was invited to assess the lawfulness of the Fund's decision for calling an extraordinary meeting to change the board of directors; 2) should the Prime Minister make an unfair or unlawful

²¹⁸ The board of directors selects the head of the executive body, decides to terminate the powers of the executive body and convenes annual and extraordinary general meetings of shareholders. The board of directors carries out the general management of the company, whereas the executive body carries out the current activity of the company. See *Zakon Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki ob akcionernih obchestvah no. 64* (27 March 2003) [Law of Kyrgyz Republic on Joint-Stock Companies].

²¹⁹ Author interview with Aman Omurzakov, former Chair of the Board of Directors, Bishkek, September 2013.

²²⁰ I rely here on workers' information and scarce media reports. In Chapter III, I noted that protests gathering together 1000 people are rare.

²²¹ 'Neftyaniki OAO 'Kyrgyzneftegaz' obyavili besrochnuu akciu protesta' [Kyrgyzneftegaz's oilmen announced the beginning of an unlimited action of protest], *Kyrtag* (28 April 2011), Available at: http://kyrtag.kg/news/neftyaniki_oao_kyrgyzneftegaz_obyavili_bessrochnuyu_aksiyu_protesta/ [29 June 2015].

decision, workers would start striking indefinitely; 3) in case of the non-execution of the first condition, the Bishkek-Osh²²² highway will be shut down.²²³ Framed this way, the movement's actions turned out to be an effective step toward forcing the Prime Minister into 'coming down' to the periphery to negotiate with the movement. In June 2011, he visited Kochkor-Ata, at which time he promised to insulate the acting board from interference by the Fund. This promise was later translated into the appointment of an external manager that was 'above party politics' and hence deemed neutral to the *kollektiv*.

Forcing the then Prime Minister to the table of negotiations and achieving the desired result was another significant success to the movement. Its success rate growing, the movement became unstoppable. As Amanda Wooden notes in a different Kyrgyzstani context of industrial protests:

The role of efficacy in motivating protesters is a partial confirmation of the collective interest model, acting as a proxy for political opportunity, showing that individuals will join a group to protest if they believe their expenditures of time, energy, and potential risk will be worth their while.²²⁴

The scope of contentious topics in which workers and their leaders became involved grew with each round of contestation. At the end of 2013 and the beginning of 2014, for example, the movement organized a series of protests in Jalal-Abad and Kochkor-Ata to contest the government's decision to split an oil refinery located in Jalal-Abad away from the company.²²⁵ The largest protests involved 1700 people, according to the local newspaper, *Aymak*, where protesters demanded an end to the corruption schemes behind the split and the

²²² This highway is the only road connecting the north and south of the country.

²²³ 'Sotrudniki OAO 'Kyrgyzneftegaz' vistupili protiv naznachenia novogo gendirektora' [Kyrgyzneftegaz employees protested against the appointment of a new general director], *Kloop* (21 April 2011), Available at: <http://kloop.kg/blog/2011/04/21/sotrudniki-oao-kyrgyzneftegaz-protiv-naznacheniya-novogo-gendirektora/> [23 March 2015].

²²⁴ Wooden, A. (2013).

²²⁵ 'Kochkor-Atada ministr Sariev menen Mammulktun bashchysynyn otstavkasyn talap kylgan miting otup jatat' [In Kochkor-Ata, the Minister of Economy Sariev and the head of the Fund of State Property are called to resign], *Barakelde* (20 December 2013), Available at: <http://barakelde.org/news:61833/> [23 March 2015].

resignation of highly-ranked government officials responsible for this decision.²²⁶ Protests by workers were successful in suspending the split. Overall, more than 35 protest actions took place between 2010 and 2014, all organized by the Movement for Truth.



Figure 3: Occupation of the company's buildings in Kochkor-Ata by workers, 20 December 2013 (courtesy Barakelde.kg).

Defending local autonomy in the centre

Along with organizing protest demonstrations in Kochkor-Ata, the movement began launching contentious actions in the capital. In Bishkek, participants of delegations became engaged in a range of activities: protest-making, raising public awareness through press conferences, meetings with high-ranked officials and political lobbying.

In Western contexts, social movements generally engage with authorities at a local level and target specific 'addressees' and opponents. This likely happens because social movements are not confronted with the blame attribution dilemma

²²⁶ 'Neftichilerdin kyjyryn kim kainatyp jatat?' [Who is getting on oilmen's nerves?], *Aymak* (1 April 2014), Available at: <http://www.aymak.kg/economic/1021-neftichilerdin-kyzhyryn-kim-kaynatyp-zhatat.html> [29 June 2015]; 'Kto dushyt 'Kyrgyzneftegaz'? [Who is choking 'Kyrgyzneftegaz'?], *Aymak* (22 December 2013), Available at: <http://www.aymak.kg/economica/440-kto-dushit-kyrgyzneftegaz.html> [29 June 2015].

and because of a relatively decentralized system of decision-making.²²⁷ In the case of Kyrgyzstan, several reasons contribute to the motivations of peripheral protest groups to 'transport' their conflicts into a central arena. These reasons include the specificity of the formation of public opinion, the infrastructure of Kyrgyzstani mass media and the highly centralized character of state power. Regional protests do not always feature in national news and there is no guarantee that relevant central authorities will become aware of protests. Particularly in the post-revolutionary period, where protests were taking place daily and more urgent issues were deflecting the government's attention, attracting media attention at a regional level was difficult for peripheral protesters. Staging protests in a central arena therefore provided better opportunities for being seen and heard.

One way for workers to attract attention to peripheral issues was the organization of public demonstrations in front of primary political institutions in the capital: Parliament, Government House, the Supreme Court and a range of different ministries. Worker delegations came to Bishkek to stage protests on various topics and during different periods between 2010 and 2014. The major contentious topics included the vote against MP Iskhak Pirmatov in the Parliament, litigations against the Fund of State Property and as previously noted, the purchase of Chinese equipment. However, workers had mixed feelings regarding the efficiency of their protests in Bishkek. Because too many protest groups with various demands competed for the attention of authorities and as a result 'overloaded' public space they found it too difficult to 'make a difference'.

Another way of attracting public attention was the use of so-called 'press conferences'. It is worth noting that press conferences have become a popular means of communication between society and the system of power, and they inform us about the malfunctioning of existing conventional channels of

²²⁷ Tarrow stressed a high degree of centralization regarding decision-making in the centre as one of the structural factors that conditions social movements. See Tarrow, S. (1994), p. 89.

communication.²²⁸ The Kyrgyzneftegaz delegates resorted to press conferences on numerous occasions; on one such an occasion, for example, they reported to the public Iskhak Pirmatov's continuous interference in the company following his removal.²²⁹ It is impossible to establish with precision the number of press conferences workers gave, however, since these performances were not always coordinated among members of the movement.

During these trips to the capital, delegates also sought to meet with a wide range of government officials and politicians in the hope of discovering the 'real' locus of power. To do so, they reached out to the highest-ranking power – the head of the then Provisional Government, Rosa Otunbaeva. In the words of one delegate:

We were obliged to seek out the highest ranked politicians because we believed that our letters to Otunbaeva were not reaching her. They were intersected by her lower ranks. We naively thought that if we discovered who the real decision makers were in this country and provided them with first-hand information we would successfully bypass the partisan party politics and resolve our demands.²³⁰

However, workers were disappointed to discover that even Otunbaeva's powers were limited, since in 2011, power had gradually been transitioned to the newly formed Parliament and the Coalition Government. However, according to delegates, these travels to the capital helped them to better understand the complexities of central politics and prepared the background for their further engagement with central opponents.

²²⁸ One example of such a press conference organized in Bishkek is 'Politikam – politiku, proizvodstvennikam – proizvodstvo. Obrachenie trudovogo kollektiva OAO 'Kyrgyzneftegaz' [Politics to politicians, production to workers. Statement of Kyrgyzneftegaz work kollektiv], *Akipress* (3 May 2011), Available at: <http://presscenter.akipress.org/news:10301>. The phenomenon of press conferences is intriguing, as it became a popular tool for communication between authorities and society.

²²⁹ 'Rabotnik 'Kyrgyzneftegaza': Deputat Pirmatov meshaet normalnoi rabote kompanii' [Kyrgyzneftegaz's employee: MP Pirmatov obstructs the normal functioning of the company], *Vecherny Bishkek* (7 February 2012), Available at: http://www.vb.kg/doc/178062_rabotnik_kyrgyzneftegaza_depytat_pirmatov_mshaet_normalnoy_rabote_kompanii.html [29 June 2015].

²³⁰ Author interview with a participant of the delegation #1, Kochkor-Ata, May 2013.

Workers also learned about political lobbying during these trips to the capital. Political lobbying, more so than public demonstrations, permitted targeting centres of power more specifically. Thus, workers from Kochkor-Ata believed they needed to undertake closer engagement with politics. For example, they lobbied for the opening of a criminal case against the former Director (now MP) Pirmatov and for the vote to levy Pirmatov's immunity in Parliament. Aided by the Ata-Meken party, they made their entry into Parliament and held private talks with more than 70 MPs. Unfortunately for the delegates, 89 deputies voted in favour of safeguarding Iskhak Pirmatov's immunity and in the absence of a majority vote, the case was suspended. The delegates were disappointed and concluded that pacts with elites were highly unstable:

After the voting, we checked the voting list and saw that those deputies who promised to back up our cause in fact voted to support their colleague, MP Pirmatov. They will never surrender one of their own. That's how the rich work.²³¹

For workers, the major outcome of these types of engagements with the central system of power was a deeper understanding that the politicization of peripheral issues in the centre had its own limits. Lobbying highlighted the extent to which elites were ill placed to represent social conflicts whereas the protests revealed the functioning of the 'saturated' public space. This meant that to stand out against the background of other multiple and noisy claim-makers, a protest group needed to engage in *sustainable repeated* public appearances. This type of engagement is a costly endeavour and not all protest groups can afford it in current Kyrgyzstani conditions. Political lobbying and numerous demonstrations carried out for several months by the Movement for Truth is rather exceptional; the example of the second empirical case will highlight that peripheral groups generally suffer from a lack of resources. On the basis of these examples, we can also better appreciate the nature of difficulties that social groups face during the course of organizing themselves and politicizing their issues. Finally, this example reflects back on the argument presented in Chapter III that fragmented

²³¹ Author interview with a participant of the delegation #2, Kochkor-Ata, May 2013.

protest movements require time to establish repeated public appearances and to learn how to make coherent demands in order to be efficient claim-makers.

What do the grievances, leadership and membership structure, and types of mobilization tell us about the Movement for Truth? First, we see that grievances moved beyond their initial, albeit vague framework during the process of engagement, as each round of contestation with opponents brought about new concerns and disagreements, and newly introduced topics continued feeding contention.²³² This case offers a different picture when compared to the second case study, in which the protesting community was unable to uphold and enhance its grievance structure. Second, although due to internal struggles for power and party interventions the initial leadership and membership structure had been obscure, it became more evident during the course of mobilization. We saw the emergence of an interesting alliance between workers and the new management as the result of the continuous engagement against central politics. Finally, the local repertoire of collective action in this empirical case was impressive. From travels to China to meetings with the President and Prime Minister, to presentations in Parliament, this movement by far exhausted the means that are generally available to other peripheral protest movements in Kyrgyzstan. This example also demonstrates that ‘unconventional’ politics, i.e., protests, were employed only after conventional channels proved inefficient. This leads me to suggest that even in the context of weak state institutions and arbitrary rules, official channels remain the primary means of contestation, and despite conditions that worked against early collective action, mobilization was possible and occurred frequently. Moreover, with every victory and episodes of contestation, the belief of workers in the success of collective action grew, which in turn secured their continuous engagement. Following the above presentation of the contradicting aspects of this study, it is high time to address the puzzle of this empirical case study.

²³² Niklas Luhmann has suggested that social movements create new topics after their formation as a means of self-sustenance. See Luhmann, N. (1993) *Risk: A sociological theory*, translated by Rhodes Barrett, New York: Aldine de Gruyterb

III. Unpacking Mobilization Dynamics: Learning Process, Opportunism and the Successful Consolidation of Movement

In this part of the chapter, I return to the primary empirical question to which I have previously alluded several times. I am intrigued by the ways in which the **Movement for Truth succeeded in establishing enduring practices of resistance and contestation against the background of an obscure political system and the initial fragmented structure of mobilization.** The previous account of successful episodes of mobilization and the extensive record of victories is, of course, an influencing factor in enforcing belief in collective action and enhancing movement membership. Yet I argue that this is but one of the factors among other important dynamics that account for the sustainability of protest movements. In this part of the chapter, I will focus on three points in order to ‘unpack’ these processes. First, I will show how resistance groups learn to operate in uncertain environments by gaining access to new information and knowledge. Second, I will describe the ways in which an uncertain environment is conducive to the appearance of opportunistic participants, whom I call ‘brokers’ and whose proliferation has detrimental effects on collective action. Finally, I will contend that a protest group can sustain itself against the background of both demobilizing central politics and discrediting brokers, if the group members nurture *trust* and successfully sideline brokers through specific group processes. In addition to the learning process, I highlight three other group processes: monitoring of initiators of collective action, episodes of mobilization and collective decision-making. I will begin with an analysis of the learning process.

3.1. Learning process and the blame attribution dilemma

After observing workers’ extensive engagement with the central system of power, I wanted to better understand the primary factors in these mobilizations: was it the expression of grievances *per se* (as a public outburst of anger/disagreement with the status quo) or the process that is the politicization of grievances? If a group had never been acquainted with strategies and tactics of politicization in

the past, it may require considerable learning experience before the said group can be classified as professional. Furthermore, in addition to the communication of grievances is the task and excitement regarding the process of politicization itself. The learning experience consists – especially if the group operates in an obscure institutional setting and volatile political environment – of understanding the nature of opponents, testing the rules of the game, trying to attribute blame, experimenting with public space, imitating others and attempting to engage with high-level politics before opposing or succumbing to it. One cannot appreciate the difficult path that Kyrgyzstani protesters had to forge in order to grow from being weak and fragmented groups into consolidated movements without accounting for the learning process. However, scientific analyses often yield final results that show already consolidated movements, as a result of what Wendy Welford calls the editing off disturbing ‘noise’ and leaving only what is ‘necessary’.²³³ Following Welford’s advice, I will not ‘edit off’ details regarding the learning experience, as it has real implications for the movement’s trajectory, even if the details expose the ‘messiness’ of the ground.

Improvisation and adventure

From the previous chapter, we have seen workers employ various forms of mobilization in the period from 2010 to 2014. This picture may suggest that the workforce represented a collective that featured a high degree of organizational coherence. I would like to challenge this argument using the example of the movement’s early actions in Bishkek in autumn 2010. In an interview with the author, the head of the People’s Defence Committee represented workers’ protests as evidence of a very important and novel process, by which ordinary citizens such as workers were to appropriate public space:

Blocking the roads and storming the state institutions are a last option for us. We witnessed that laws do not work and formal complaints and official letters are inefficient. Only by staging protests can we be sure to attract the

²³³ Welford, W. (2010).

attention of authorities. It's politics [*sayasat*]... In the past, workers were not able to engage in politics.²³⁴

The above quote illuminates the ways in which workers and their leaders think of their contention and their path toward politics, and I will return to this matter later in the text. This ideal narrative depicts protesters as actors who have eventually managed to master central politics and the business of protesting. Luckily, ordinary participants also have intermittent memories of their initial protest experiences. The following story of a female participant, the head of the Kyrgyzneftegaz's local kindergarten and a member of the Ata-Meken party, is a captivating one.

KD: When I think of those days when we first came to Bishkek to protest, these were crazy days back then. We saw on TV how ordinary people from the regions went to Bishkek and we thought we could also voice our concerns there (*maseleni kotoruu*). Upon arrival, we went directly to the Government House. We stood there for some time not knowing what to do because it was completely silent, as if the building was empty. [Then] someone banded from a window and told us, 'The government isn't formed yet, don't wait here'. We felt stupid, and decided to rush to the Supreme Court. While our men ran I couldn't follow them. I have a leg problem; I told them to hurry and that I would catch up with them later. I didn't even know the address and got lost in the streets (laughing and smiling). It was crazy! We were running around the city with our posters. When we came to the court, we met the '7 April' guys²³⁵ there; they told us that it is actually best to go to the Parliament and protest in front of the deputies. So we ran again (laughing and smiling). Finally, when we reached the Parliament, which was just around the corner of where we were before at the Government House, we realized we were not alone. The place was full of other protesters... And there we stood not knowing what to do and how to distinguish ourselves from the crowd. We didn't know how to attract attention of the deputies. Our men even suggested jokingly to the policemen to arrest us and this way, maybe, to catch the deputies' attention (laughing and smiling). At the end of the day, a couple of deputies walked out and talked to us. We were so happy that our trip had not been in vain and we returned home! It was

²³⁴ Author interview with the Chair of the People's Defence Committee, Kochkor-Ata, November 2011.

²³⁵ The '7 April' movement emerged after the April Revolution of 2010. Formed in order to claim the rights of families whose members had died or had been injured during the revolution (87 people were killed and hundreds injured), it quickly became what is referred to in Kyrgyzstan as 'politicized'. The movement became involved in a large number of protests on various topics, ranging from corruption and lustration to education. It was finally discredited amongst the public when a head of the movement's southern branch was found cheating families who had been victims of the revolution.

crazy... I will never forget how we were running around in the city not really knowing what we were doing (laughing and smiling).

AD: Why did you participate in these trips? Why did you go to Bishkek?

KD: We were simply interested in how this all will end. We didn't really know who to talk to or how to talk to officials. We only knew that there was one deputy sitting in the Parliament that was elected from our district in Kochkor-Ata. But we continued, regardless. On the one hand, we were naïve and on the other hand determined, just like children (laughing and smiling). We simply wanted to continue and to see what would happen.

AD: How did you organize your trips to Bishkek? Who decided and how on who would go?

KD: Organized? No, there was no organization as such. Cars were leaving from our company's headquarters to Bishkek and everyone wanted to be in those cars. Sometimes we had to come very early in the morning in order to reserve a seat and we had to fight among ourselves. People were offended because not everyone could be included. I went to Bishkek on a couple of occasions because I was a member of the People's Defence Committee and the Ata-Meken party. Later our movement has expanded and many more people joined the committee. I think they joined the committee because everyone wanted to go to the capital. I am glad to have been part of those trips to Bishkek. I was part of our history.²³⁶

The events related above hold many important details for our study. First, it seems that much of workers' activities have been decided *ad hoc* with no preliminary knowledge or coordination. The delegations to Bishkek were formed in a spontaneous and amateur manner. It suggests that participants had conducted no preliminary research. Had the opposite been true, such research would likely have consisted of, for example, acquiring basic knowledge about major political events such as the formation of central government, making appointments with relevant authorities, learning about protest-making strategies and tactics, preparing for negotiations, etc. Second, these revelations underscore that the workers' delegations had not been that much different from the rest of the actors of that period: improvisation and simple participation in events were as significant as the cause for which they travelled to the capital. Additionally, improvisation and participation were likely to be a 'natural' reaction to complex events occurring within the central arena. Third, as the above account shows, workers from Kochkor-Ata were guided more by curiosity and a sense of

²³⁶ Interview with the head of the company's kindergarten, Kochkor-Ata, December 2014.

adventure than by a specific rationale. In the context of institutional uncertainty, rational choice theories are not a fit for explaining protesters' behaviour. Therefore, their protest actions appear as 'situational' performances rather than professional performances. Only later, through exchanges with other experienced protest groups, learning from them strategies and techniques and by informing themselves about many ambiguous centres of power did these protest groups grow more 'professional' in their protest making. As Tarrow writes, 'once formulated and successfully employed, the collective action frame of one movement campaign is often imported into the messages of other movements.'²³⁷ I would push this notion further and suggest that it is not only an outward-directed, but specifically an inward-directed outcome, since workers created opportunities for themselves by introducing lessons learned into their own structure. Again, this example demonstrates that in order to stand out amidst other 'noise-makers', protest groups require experience and time. Again, the account goes against existing theories about elite manipulation in which protesters would be following a highly organized structure of events.

The spontaneity of public actions also had a political background: the moment had to be seized while the window of opportunity was open, because nobody knew how the post-revolutionary political system would evolve from 2011 onward. These protests differed from mobilizations that occur in both democratic and authoritarian regimes, in which the predictability of the regime's features (openness and repression, respectively) allows participants to elaborate on their protest claims and to work on their strategies. In the case of the Kyrgyzstani post-revolutionary environment, events were highly unpredictable and moved at a rapid pace. The openness of the post-revolutionary political system was both a facilitating factor for the emergence of social movements and a demobilizing condition for their further development. On the one hand, such weakened or fragmented polity sends a strong message to challengers that there will be little if any repression. On the other hand, such polity serves as a powerful depoliticizing

²³⁷ Tarrow, S. (1994), p. 131.

factor, because any sustainable contestation requires a responsive and not fragmented opponent. I argue that as a state effect, depoliticization rather than repression is an important institutional factor that affects social movements within emerging democracies.

Knowing the unknown

Observing the previously discussed restless but confused protesters running around in the capital, one might want to know why protesters do not choose to address the relevant authority responsible for their specific grievances, rather than trying to call out the entire system of power as a whole. Why do protesters engage with a wide range of political and legal authorities? A number of authors deal with similar questions that concern protest-making in non-established democracies or autocracies. O'Brien and Li, for example, show how Chinese rural protesters successfully pit one level of the state against another.²³⁸ In contrast, Debra Javeline illustrated how early independence Russian workers had been demobilized in the face of the 'blame attribution dilemma', that is, the failure to identify institutions or individuals accountable for unpaid wages.²³⁹ These concepts are important because they highlight the ways in which citizens perceive the environment in which they operate.

In Kyrgyzstan, far from demobilization, protesters make efforts to 'transcend' the obscure central politics as part of their learning process. This is, however, a daunting and resource-consuming task. Below I would like to provide a short example of the ways Kyrgyzneftegaz employees have engaged with uncertain central politics.

Let me remind that the Kyrgyzneftegaz company is a state company and that the Fund of State Property is supposed to be the workers' official 'facilitator' in the

²³⁸ O'Brien, K. and Lianjiang, L. (2006) *Rightful resistance in rural China*, New York: Cambridge University Press.

²³⁹ Javeline, D. (2009) *Protest and the politics of blame: The Russian response to unpaid wages*, University of Michigan Press.

centre. However, as already indicated, the Fund had been ‘high-jacked’ by the new corporate party system, which resulted in the high fragmentation of the state by party politics and further complexification of the system of power. This meant that being a state company, which is supposed to be an advantage when compared to protest groups that operate outside of any institutional channels and established relations with the state, did not in fact ease the workers’ task of understanding better the central politics. The following anecdote by a participant of the workers’ delegation to the capital highlights this point:

In one of the trips to the capital we, needed to confront the bureaucrats who supervised our sector, our production performance. In theory, our principal supervisors should be located in the Fund of State Property, the Ministry of Economy and the Ministry of Energy and Transport. We first approached the Ministry of Economy, but once there, we were told that we needed to address ourselves to the Ministry of Industry. At the Ministry of Industry, we were referred to the Ministry of Energy and Transport. Once there, however, we were sent back to the Ministry of Economy. It took us five days in total veering between these ministries until we finally established that the correct ministry was the Ministry of Economy and a special department therein that was responsible for our production. You see, in this country, there is no institutional memory; a high rotation of personnel precludes the normal flow of information which means that nobody knows anything any longer. I could never have imagined that our state system was such a mess! Of course we get angry, because nothing gets done in this country!²⁴⁰

The above account illustrates difficult access to state institutions, a lack of knowledge about individual rights and uncertainty about centres of political decision-making. Another point of confusion for the protesters was the system of appointment to official positions, which had been at the heart of contention between the Fund and the workers in early 2011. As one employee recalls:

When the Fund of State Property tried to unseat our managers, we ought to have had an understanding of how these appointments worked. Theoretically, the corresponding ministries should give their candidates to the Prime Minister, who then appoints the board of directors, who then selects the executive. In our case, these actors are the Ministry of Energy, the Fund of State Property and partly the Social Fund, which holds 10 per cent of our shares. Each should nominate their candidates to the board. Yet following the introduction of the party system the above-mentioned ministries were relegated under the control of five political parties. They

²⁴⁰ Interview with an employee #3, Bishkek, December 2014.

began informally nominating candidates to state companies using official ministerial channels. We thus suspected that the heads of ministries may not have been informed of these candidates and that party bosses communicated with the Prime Minister directly. We therefore wondered – does the Prime Minister have personal control over these matters? Why didn't he manage to tame the appetite of the Fund, which continued its attempts to unseat us even after the government's decision to insulate our board? Are there any rules either way? Or is everything decided personally, depending on the situation and elite's interests? We wanted to safeguard our board and to do so, we had to understand where the threat was coming from and prepare our own attack. Yet, this was not an easy task.²⁴¹

Changing coalition government constantly fuelled confusion about bureaucratic rules and regulations. During the period starting from the end of 2010 until the end of 2014, the Coalition Government changed three times, bringing about a change of 'controllers' over state agencies and assets. As such, the Fund was first controlled by the Ata-Meken party, then Respublica, before moving finally to the SDPK. Encounters with state institutions taught workers that the state was not a monolith that applies non-arbitrary rules and regulations. Therefore, guided by political parties, state agencies can follow interests independently of the general governmental line. In a context of pervasive uncertainty, Kathleen Kuehnast and Nora Dudwick described the problem of personalized relationships and informal politics of corruption as knowing 'whose rules rule'.²⁴²

These inner workings of the system were preoccupying protesters' minds for much of the period between 2010 and 2013. Thus, a significant part of the movement's time was consumed for the purpose of making sense of national developments and calculating the behaviour of state institutions and elites. As McAdam writes, 'challengers experience shifting political conditions on a day-to-day basis as a set of "meaningful" events, communicating much about their prospects for successful collective action.'²⁴³ It became the responsibility of the

²⁴¹ Interview with an employee #4, Bishkek, December 2014.

²⁴² Kuehnast, K. and Dudwick, N. (2008) World Bank Group, Social Development Department. *Whose rules rule? Everyday border and water conflict in Central Asia*, Washington, DC.

²⁴³ McAdam, D. (1982), p. 48.

union and the People's Defence Committee to track changes in the coalition government and supply employees with insider information.

As illustrated above, the lack of credible information and uncertainty within the environment did not limit the quantity of initial engagement of workers, but did disorient them in the intermediate term. Complex central politics with unclear rules of the game serve as a powerful factor of blame attribution dilemma and inhibit many protest groups from developing already at the initial stage of contention. Protest groups must have enhanced resources in order to maintain a sustained access to information and knowledge located in the centre. We can now appreciate that movement coherence is contingent not only on internal organizational resources, but also on the wider conditions of economic development, access to information and knowledge of individual rights. This example provides us with an important context regarding antecedent conditions against which protest groups emerge and function.

3.2. Opportunism: brokers and institutional uncertainty

From the above discussion, the impact of an uncertain environment on the development of protest groups was highlighted. Protesters were highly uncertain about whether state institutions and political organizations such as parties could assist them. In this section I would like to develop one more implication of political environment on protest-making business. Protracted institutional uncertainty has recently given rise to specific actors who employ this uncertainty as grounds for business. Within the conflict in Kochkor-Ata, I also met diverse actors who presented themselves as intermediaries serving as 'bridges' between disconnected peripheries and the obscure central political system. These individuals were very vocal and politicized but they proposed ways of carrying contentious collective action different from what is usually expected. I decided to

refer in my thesis to these intermediaries as 'brokers' and their activities as 'brokerage'.

Why is brokerage an important phenomenon for the study of social movements? Brokers have emerged and proliferated in different spheres of social interactions and almost in every corner of the country. Their study is important because brokers transform, as I will show in the subsequent sections, the protest-making process in two significant ways that contrast the Western, generally positive conceptualization of brokerage as mediation. First, they use informal types of engagement such as cooptation to distort the very meaning of public engagement. Consequently, the difficult task of staging a collective public action is devalued if one seizes an opportunity to negotiate secretly behind closed doors. Second, brokers endanger the sustainability of grassroots mobilizations. They distort the complex processes of formulating legitimate demands, aggregating a consistent agenda, uniting around recognizable leadership and forging a common identity. In the rest of this section, I will describe brokers' functions and provide examples of their interference in protest activities in Kochkor-Ata.

Brokers: 'bridging' gaps between centre and periphery

When I began my fieldwork in Kochkor-Ata, I expected to find some sort of local workforce led by a legitimate organization or leadership. When arriving at Jalal-Abad's provincial centre, I was advised outright to connect with two organizations: the local union and the People's Defence Committee. Local journalists and representatives of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) cited these organizations as the 'drivers' of the Movement for Truth. I should say that neither the union nor the committee appeared as brokers or intermediaries in the beginning of my study. The union, which was created in 1976, still carried out the same official activities as it had during the Soviet era, i.e., improving workers' social welfare. However, during the past three years, its most important role had become mediation between the movement and central opponents. The union

worked in partnership with the People's Defence Committee until 2014, when the committee became marginalized in favour of the union (I will return to this topic later). These two organizations, as partial leaders of the Movement for Truth, therefore deserve closer inspection. I will first discuss the People's Defence Committee, because I believe it to have been the primary broker until being sidelined, and will discuss the role of the union in the final section of the chapter.

The People's Defence Committee (*Eldik korgoo komiteti*) was formed by a small group of workers in 2009; however, following the April Revolution, it grew to involve hundreds of members. The committee was active within the workers' movement since the takeover of management in April 2010. At the time of the first interview in 2011, the chair of the committee could not precisely define the group's exact number of members. However, the labour movement was not the only preoccupation of the committee. According to the committee chairman, Ondurush Zamanov, who was also an employee of the company, the committee's primary function consisted of mediation between authorities and local constituencies.

OZ: The role of the committee is organizational. We organize meetings between the population and authorities. In other words, we serve as a *bridge (kopuroo)* between these factions. I also organize protests on other topics of relevance, because people come to me with their concerns.

AD: What kind of concerns?

OZ: People come with complaints related to various contexts: farming, corruption, micro-crediting, the justice system, etc.

AD: Why do they think you can solve their problems?

OZ: I can't solve them, but I am good at writing complaints, making claims and representing their interests. In other words, as I have previously stated, I facilitate the need for 'bridging'.²⁴⁴

The above reveals that there exists a necessity for mediation between the local structure of grievances and authorities, and that special local committees such as this one facilitate this gap. It also tells us a little more about the nature of the

²⁴⁴ Author interview with Ondurush Zamanov, Chairman of the People's Defence Committee, Kochkor-Ata, autumn 2011.

Kyrgyzstani state and the degree of its 'spatial expansion' in rural areas.²⁴⁵ Specifically, it points yet again to the disconnection between Kyrgyzstani regions and the centre, which finds its expressions in the emergence and proliferation of these resourceful local committees. They do not claim to compete for state performance, since they lack such capacity; instead, they tap into state weaknesses in order to harness societal grievances.

When it comes to the labour movement, the chair states that the committee's goal was to defend the rights of employees. This defence yet again appears to be a bridging role between the centre and the periphery, and included the following functions. The committee fulfilled the function of 'liaison' between their contentious site and central decision-makers, in that it was responsible for acquiring the information and knowledge needed for local protest groups. Here, an important aspect of the committee's job was its ability to engage with formal rules and regulations, such as writing official complaints and letters, preparing legal actions and reading court decisions. Its services rested on the reputation of having special skills in communication, in connecting people and in knowing legal contexts. The organization also managed news coverage and was responsible for organizing press conferences and giving official interviews. In this way, it acted as an important 'gatekeeper' of information. Third, in many instances, the committee acted as a 'representative' of the workers' movement. Members of the committee led protest delegations to the capital and held negotiations with officials and politicians on behalf of the movement.²⁴⁶

However, these functions can be attributed to the leadership of any social movement or organization. Besides coordinating, representing and connecting, there is, however, another important role that the committee fulfils, that is, the

²⁴⁵ Furguson, J. and Gupta, A. (2002) 'Spatializing states: Towards an ethnography of neoliberal governmentality', *American Ethnologist*, vol. 29, no. 4, November, pp. 981-1002.

²⁴⁶ Roberto Fernandez and Roger Gould identified in a different context of brokerage a similar list of functions: Fernandez, R. and Gould, R. (1994) 'A dilemma of state power: Brokerage and influence in the national health policy domain', *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 99, no. 6, May, pp. 1455-1491.

real or imagined establishment and maintenance of political relations. The chair of the committee described these activities in the following terms:

I regularly make trips to Bishkek and keep in touch with politicians. If necessary, I can even reach out to the Prime Minister, Jantoro Satybaldiev. I constantly keep myself up to date with politics. Here in the province, we keep track of big politics (*chon sayasat*) and the types of alliances that are formed in the capital, because these have a direct impact on our company [Kyrgyzneftegaz].²⁴⁷

Of course, in the context of major constitutional reforms that change the configuration of power, one might suggest that the leadership of a social movement should take into consideration political factors and spend significant time on cultivating networks and securing political support. However, brokers are not typical leaders and the grand statement above is a good illustration of it. It is difficult to know with certainty whether the committee chair mentions the names of top officials to make himself look important, or if he is indeed capable of activating such connections. On the one hand, it is interesting that a factory employee apparently requires a daily report about political alliances in Bishkek for an otherwise apolitical job. On the other hand, it is intriguing that the highest government officials might make themselves readily available to the heads of peripheral intermediating organizations. Such claims are heavily exaggerated. Given the ever-changing government coalitions and unpredictable alliances, central politicians will quickly be overwhelmed by the appeals of such local committees. However, the decisive point is that they cultivate at least the impression of access to the centre, as well as being in possession of special abilities. In this way, they send a message both to the centre and to their local clients, i.e., that they can do whatever is needed. Whether they actually can or cannot in the end is of secondary importance (after all, they act as gatekeepers of their own cultivated networks); what is important is the reputation such impressions gain them. Such social functioning already sets them apart from

²⁴⁷ Author interview with Ondurush Zamanov, Chairman of the People's Defence Committee, Kochkor-Ata, autumn 2011.

genuine leadership, which rests not only on the impression of capability, but is also in reality tested against their successes and failures.

Brokers and politicization of societal concerns

If the real or fake cultivation of political relations is central to brokers' position, in which contexts do they employ their brokering capacities? The following example will highlight the nature of their business in the centre.

An opportunity to make connections with central patrons arose when in December 2011 the General Prosecution opened a criminal case against the former Director of Kyrgyzneftegaz company, MP Pirmatov. The case was opened on the basis of charges of corruption and required a special voting procedure in Parliament to levy the MP's immunity. At this point, participants of the Movement for Truth had familiarized themselves with central politics and strategies, as well as protest-making tactics. They had already visited the capital on several occasions and the voting procedure turned out to be another great opportunity for creating connections with an important institution, i.e., Parliament. Since the procedure required a majority vote out of 120,²⁴⁸ a special worker delegation, including members of the People Defence Committee, travelled to Bishkek in order to conduct private talks with deputies. Members of the delegation proudly claimed that they had conducted negotiations with 70 deputies (!) in the hope that they would support the workers' cause. However, as we already know, the majority of MPs did not succumb to cooptation and the negotiations failed entirely. Why then build alliances with politicians if contacts with them turn out rather superficial? Why become involved in conventional politics when traditional social movements generally criticize mainstream politics for their corruption and as a result prefer to employ 'unconventional' means to contest existing policies?

²⁴⁸ Reglament Jogorku Kenesha Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki [Regulation of Jogorku Kenesh of the Kyrgyz Republic], [Online], Available at: <http://parliament.am/library/kanonakarger/KIRGIZ.pdf>

Again, answers to some of these questions can be found in the features of central politics and the ways in which protesters perceive them. Individuals observe the central political arena via television and mass media as a place characterized by both a high turnover of political personnel and the endurance of old elites. On the one hand, by watching how members of the elite compete for official positions via the mobilization of allegedly aggrieved social groups supporting them, local actors are also convinced that their own mobilization can serve as a means for gaining access to opportunities. On the other hand, this practice discredits the original, democratic meaning of protests and protesters already know that there is little chance that a central audience will believe the authenticity of their claims. Most of these reflections are tied with despair and disillusionment as my interviews with actors from both empirical chapters have revealed. This dilemma leads to some protesters eventually discarding public opinion and resorting to old politics, which in the context of the corrupt Kyrgyzstani system implies cooptation. From this arises the continuing necessity for seeking patrons in the centre. This further undermines any notion of democratic meaning inherent in protests if observed by a central audience. This outcome exposes the persistence of a 'vicious cycle' in which peripheral protesters attempt their best to combine methods in a bid to reduce the risks related to an uncertain environment and unspoken rules of the game. It also shows that brokers and central politics are in a circular relationship reproducing dynamics that reinforce their mutual existence.

Thus, brokers cannot view the process of the politicization of social issues as merely a part of the protest business; for them, the process is part of personal business. They seek to interact directly with central political actors in order to send them the message that they can successfully fulfil the bridging role between an aggrieved community and the state. In this way, they imagine themselves 'doing politics' in Bishkek and legitimize their role as intermediaries in the eyes of ordinary workers.

The next question that arises from this observation is what does politics bring to brokers and workers? I was puzzled by this question during the entire study and was unable to conclude ‘meaningful’ answers from my respondents. Workers had mixed feelings about the usefulness of actions in the capital and were inclined to think that their achievements were a result of the combination of unconventional (radical protests) and conventional (lobbying) tools. In relation to brokers, it is difficult to estimate the precise opportunities they observed during the process of politicization in Bishkek. It seems that these opportunities are hypothetical; furthermore, because it is impossible to know in advance whether delegations will return home successful, the capital Bishkek presents itself as a tempting political opportunity structure.²⁴⁹ But would this not render any genuine leadership dependant on the highly contiguous outcome of pervasively corrupt conventional politics in the capital? I will provide one more example of the vagueness of opportunities in the following section.

Brokers and internal cohesion

Amid the exciting phenomenon of tricky brokerage, it is easy to lose sight of what their activities mean for the workers who perceive their employment and livelihood in the mono-town as being endangered by central politics. In this section, I will highlight how opportunist brokerage morphs protest agendas, using the example of a bargaining episode between the centre and workers. This episode serves not only the above-mentioned objective of not ‘editing out’ petty power struggles, but also highlights the challenges of establishing efficient leadership within protest movements in such contexts as the Kyrgyzstani periphery.

²⁴⁹ In his detailed study of rural mobilization in Aksy village, Scott Radnitz explained the existence of patron-client vertical networks as a direct consequence of the impoverishment of rural communities and the elite’s substitution of public goods. See Radnitz, S. (2005). This is a valid point; however, in my case, what connects peripheral brokers and hypothetical patrons in the centre seems to be much less concrete. Brokers try to squeeze something – anything – out of Bishkek: a job, some money, a favour, a nice lunch, a treatment at the Issik-kul resort and, most important, status. In addition, being able to meet with important men and women like Interim President Roza Otunbaeva, or the Prime Minister guarantees respect and prestige upon the return of brokers home.

In the summer of 2011, then Prime Minister, Almazbek Atambaev, insulated the board of management from party interventions, workers did not expect this to continue having an effect on their company two years later. Although Atambaev's intervention secured the popularly elected management, the Fund of State Property continued its attempts to unseat the acting board at every general meeting of shareholders. In the spring of 2013, I attended one such annual meeting, during which the chair of the popularly elected board of directors was removed.

The annual meeting was organized for the 223 Kyrgyzneftegaz shareholders and their trustees. The Fund of State Property represented the state, which owns 85 per cent of shares. The meeting was highly anticipated by employees, due to the controversial question regarding the new composition of the board of directors. The reason for this was new pressure to appoint loyal directors, this time stemming from the ruling party, SDPK.²⁵⁰ The current Chair of the Board of Directors, the well-respected Aman Omurzakov (who had no party affiliation), had been unexpectedly relieved of his position. At the onset of the meeting, workers aired their concern about Omurzakov's removal and demanded clarification for this action from the Fund, which they did not receive. Prior to the start of the meeting, I perceived tense discussions among the workers; they would attempt to defend Omurzakov and keep the majority of the board of directors in place. After a quick vote concerning other items in the agenda, workers demanded that the major issue of the day be addressed, i.e., the composition of the board of directors. One by one, workers began raising this issue.

Worker 1:

- Last year, thanks to the board of directors, we acquired a new factory and a drill. Our salaries were raised and our dividends were secured. These achievements were made possible by the current board. We are concerned about the fact that Omurzakov is being removed. Explain the

²⁵⁰ The party was formed in 1993 but was only registered on 16 December 1994. Abdygany Erkebaev was the party's first chairman. The current President of Kyrgyzstan, Almazbek Atambaev, replaced him on 30 July 1999. The majority of the party's membership is drawn from the country's businessmen. The party has participated in two revolutions and is now a leading coalition member. *Wikipedia*, [Online], Available at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_Democratic_Party_of_Kyrgyzstan [23 August 2015].

reasons to us! Why? The current board must remain, because it has proven its commitment to honesty and zero corruption! Keep the current board or stop the meeting! (Applause and cheers).

Nurbek Kalmatov, Spokesperson for the Fund of State Property:

- Dear shareholders, I am familiar with your problems, as I was myself born and raised in Kochkor-Ata. I am a local guy. Today, the state is not in a position to make decisions about the future of Kyrghyzneftegaz; this is up to the 120 members of Parliament. The Social Fund is another shareholder and together with you, we are all in the same position.

Worker 2:

- Oh, give us a break with your origins! You say we are in the 'same position', but you have the largest stake of shares and hence impose your decisions on us! Don't indoctrinate us!

Nurbek Kalmatov, Spokesperson for the Fund of State Property:

- I am one of yours; I am from Kochkor-Ata! And on your insistence, we have reserved three directors of your choice out of five!

Worker 3:

- Stop talking about your origins; talk about procedures! We demand four! Respect the people! (Applause and cheers).

Aman Omurzakov [current Chairman of the Board of Directors]:

- You all know that today, everything runs according to party principles. But I am not a Respublica or SDPK's member. Quite to the contrary, my support stems from the work *kollektiv*. I have no idea why they are getting rid of me. I have worked here for three years and you all know my work. We are one of the best companies – we made a significant contribution to the national economy without any investors, all by our own means! (Applause and cheers).

Worker 4:

- We are repeatedly instigating revolutions but nothing changes! The people are satisfied with the government and with the board of directors. However, if you don't stop these games, the people will take to the streets again! Let's close down the meeting! (applause and cheers, movement in the auditorium).

Ondurush Zamanov, Chairman of the People's Defence Committee:

- The People's Defence Committee has supported workers in their fight for the truth. We won't give up now! We demand clarification from the state or we will take to the streets again! (Applause and cheers).

Worker 5:

- President Atambaev has launched the fight against corruption. Does it ring a bell for you? By your dubious moves in the board of directors you are undermining his efforts! You are working against national interests! (Applause and cheers).

By this point, the workers' anger over the state-secretary's non-responsiveness was building. After dubious movements on the stage involving secret talks and phone calls, the state secretary announced a short break. During this recess, both workers and the state representatives left the building and conducted 'negotiations'. I took advantage of the break to talk to workers who had remained in the auditorium. While participants could not fully make sense of the ongoing interactions between state officials and the incumbent board, a rumour was circulating that Prime Minister Jantoro Satybaldiev had been reached out to. When the meeting reconvened, workers exhibited a dramatic change in attitude. If before they had demonstrated a unanimous and theatrical-like support for their Chairman, Omurzakov, after the break, they appeared to have turned against him.



Figure 4: The annual meeting of shareholders, Kochkor-Ata, May 2013

(© AseI Doolotkeldieva).

Worker 6:

- Dear workers, well ... you see, the 'power' [*biylik*] is not as weak as it used to be. This power is even able to imprison deputies and can also punish us if we continue doing things according to our will. We can lose everything and roll back to where we were three years ago. We better accommodate the [Prime Minister] Satybaldiev's person in order to save our remaining directors. So, let's carry on the meeting and come back to Omurzakov's question later.

Female worker 7:

- You are hypocrites! A minute ago you were calling for everyone to sabotage the meeting if Omurzakov's question was not resolved immediately. Now, you say just the opposite. You are proving your southern mentality in its best tradition!

Worker 8:

- No, he's right. We ought to listen to the state and carry on with the meeting! We ought to take the state's interests into account and not act selfishly.

Ondurush Zamanov, Chairman of the People's Defence Committee:

- Yes, let's obey the law, let's stick to the rules! We need the rule of law in our country! Let's stick to the rules! (Applause and cheers).

The overall atmosphere in the auditorium was tense. A handful of workers tried to object to this dramatic shift, but voices supporting the new arrangement drowned them out. Ultimately, Omurzakov was removed and workers approved the new SDPK-affiliated chair. It is very difficult to ascertain exactly why this shift occurs; methods of political ethnography and participant observation do not always allow covering the gaps of understanding. In all likelihood, the state Fund and party officials had already decided to remove Omurzakov, and the meeting had simply been an exercise designed to make workers feel part of the decision-making process and to avoid major discontent.

The obscure actions by central actors, however, left the door open for brokers to step in. It was difficult to ascertain beyond doubt whether workers and brokers knew in advance that the state Fund would play the Prime Minister card in order to convince the workers about the change of board of directors. Additionally, brokers' interference made it unclear whether brokers had made a rational

concession in order not to lose the entire deal, or because of hypothetical opportunities they might gain from the Prime Minister's cooptation. Regardless, members of the People's Defence Committee used this opportunity to reconfirm their role as a bridge between workers and central politics.

This example does not mean that workers lost the overall battle against central politics, but serves as an example of how brokers can transform labour resistance into yet another instance of cooptation. To be sure, the cooptation of social movements is historically known worldwide. In Latin America, the cooptation of unions by political parties has been viewed as a threat to labour movements' autonomy.²⁵¹ In the US, government and sponsors pressured civil rights movement leaders into containing their radical demands.²⁵² In Kyrgyzstan, brokers offer themselves to cooptation in ways that differ from the above-mentioned cases. In the case of Kochkor-Ata, the pressure exerted on the board of directors was not clear to the rest of the auditorium, but only to workers and brokers who were involved in bargains behind the stage. For other workers who were patiently waiting in the auditorium, neither the behaviour of their fellow colleagues or that of central actors had been clear. This led them to distrust the meeting and to interpret the ongoing bargain as nothing more than a 'political game' (*oyun*). For them, as exemplified by the outcry of a female employee, the process endangered the coherence and integrity of the workers' agenda.

It is difficult to precisely understand what happened during the meeting of shareholders, the agenda pursued by actors from the capital and the role of brokers in it. On the one hand, as seen from the above examples, brokers' actions have detrimental effects on collective action. On the other hand, if brokers actually behaved as expected, i.e., in an opportunistic manner, the role of other workers becomes prominent. Brokers were not the only actors in the auditorium who were tempted by the Prime Minister's real or hypothetical

²⁵¹ Slater, D. (ed.) (1985) *New social movements and the state in Latin America*, Netherlands and USA: Foris Publications Holland/USA.

²⁵² McAdam, D. (1982).

cooptation. The same, extremely outspoken workers who blackmailed the state representatives into sabotaging the meeting were ready to shift position, this time indicating a greater degree of flexibility and deference to the central government. Quickly reacting to the shift, many workers appeared to be astute, politically informed actors for whom contestation and the threat of social unrest became a game.

By pointing out the salience of brokerage as an emerging social practice, I do not wish to overemphasize the intentionality of actors' way of thinking and acting. Wendy Wolford's nuanced insight into the contentious politics of Brazilian small farmers is very timely in this regard. She writes:

Whether the focus is on the "people" who engage in collective action or on some set of hegemonic actors who manipulate others (in the case of this book, the sugarcane elites), *someone* with access to perfect information in competitive political markets is making decisions [emphasis original]. When we come across "informants" who contradict themselves or who can't explain their own motivations, we think of these contradictions as "noise" and edit them out: nonsense, by definition, does not make sense. And it certainly does not make revolutions.²⁵³

Although my aim was to highlight the growing phenomenon of brokerage, which has spread both in the capital and in the periphery as a response to the fragmented state and over-complex politics, I tend to think that the line between a broker and an active worker is very thin. Ultimately, when the entire environment is conducive to opportunism it becomes generic and can affect many more members within contentious movements.

The above poses important questions for our case study in terms of the impact of brokerage on social structures and identities. What are the impacts of cooptation on peripheral protest groups, on behalf of which brokers pretend to broker a deal? Do brokers pose a general organizational risk to the success of a protest movement? I suggest that brokerage bears several implications. First, easy cooptation undermines true leadership. The outgoing chair of the board of

²⁵³ Wolford, W. (2010), p.25.

directors, Aman Omurzakov, was praised for having made important achievements for the Kyrgyzneftegaz company. However, by the end of the annual meeting, the brokers' actions had devalued his role. This meant that everyone, regardless of their achievements, could be deposed if new attractive alliances present themselves. Second, brokerage erodes relations of trust and solidarity among the workforce. As indicated by the female employee's short interference, workers intercepted other workers' shifting positions. The flexibility of brokers signifies that trust and solidarity can quickly be exchanged for hypothetical political opportunities.

The micro foundations of collective action may be invisible in the short run, but they present significant transformations for the political system, intermediately and in the long run. If protesters do not own their negotiations, if middlemen manipulate the bargaining arenas, if collective decision-making is falsified and democratic deliberation is simulated, protest groups could wait a very long time for the desired change to occur. The distortion of these important processes devalues the meaning of politics and the meaning of public protests altogether. These observations once more give rise to the question: how was it possible for workers to achieve their impressive record of victories through collective action against the background of uncertain environment and intervening brokers? As I will argue in the final section, the success of weakly structured grassroots movements lies in their ability to marginalize opportunist activists and to cope with demobilizing central politics, which is conducive to brokerage. I will present the means by which workers had been able to do this in the next section.

3.3. Consolidation of the Movement for Truth

How is it possible to succeed in the context of significant institutional uncertainty when even fellow colleagues act in a way that undermines collective goals? I ask under which conditions grassroots protest groups can master external and internal challenges, i.e. complex central politics and brokers. Furthermore, what means can allow them to overcome precarious conditions, i.e. limited access to

information and knowledge, lack of experience in engaging in contentious politics, the initial fragmented structure of leadership and membership, unknown opponents and others.

In Chapter III, I argued that the creation of *trust* between the initiators of resistance and future members is a pre-condition for any group that aspires to transform its provisional performance into lasting practices of contestation. The production of trust is responsible for the constitution of legitimate leadership and committed membership, which are necessary for giving rise to continuous mobilizations. Following the social construction of the protests approach, I also argued that it is best to track the production of trust within 'group processes'. One chief group process in which trust is either created or absent is the 'monitoring' process. Successful production of trust leads to further steps in the creation of a movement's sustainability: learning capabilities, belief in the success of collective action, collective decision-making and group empowerment. In the following section, I will illustrate several group processes that contributed to the sustainability of the labour movement. I will start this discussion with an important monitoring process.

Production of trust via monitoring process

Monitoring is a salient interacting process by which both initiators of resistance and future members test one another for authenticity and commitment to the cause. It is in this process that initiators attempt to prove to the local audience their authenticity, i.e., commitment to collective interests. To be precise, the trust under question refers to one's conviction regarding the commitment of initiators and other members for achieving collective interests. Thus, monitoring can be understood as a process of repeated observations that are needed for making ongoing decisions among participants of contention concerning participation in collective action, or alternatively, about disconnecting at any moment from such participation if suspicions about non-authenticity take over. Therefore, trust has to not only be acquired but also continuously maintained. Monitoring processes may

take place at different sites and times, depending on locally available resources. In Kochkor-Ata, monitoring was available both during significant events and daily routine actions.

In the context of initial internal divisions and external cooptation, trust in the initiators of the Movement for Truth and their proposed cause did not come naturally; this is obvious from the reflections of a female worker noted below:

In the beginning I was against his [Pirmatov's] ousting, because I didn't know whether charges against Pirmatov were true and whether the new management would act any better. But the new board gained our trust by revealing corruption schemes, by increasing our salaries and streamlining production. A year ago, our annual profit consisted of 18 MLN som only; this year, we made some 400 MLN som without resorting to production changes. This increase reveals much about the previous corruption schemes and the honesty of the present management. The current leaders now have our full trust.²⁵⁴

The above interview was conducted in 2011, following a dynamic year filled with multiple episodes of collective action and major organizational and production changes taking place within the company. There was a change in management, the intrusion of political parties and petty inter-departmental struggles for power, which occurred within a short period of time and did not go unnoticed by ordinary workers. Respondents remembered this period as a point of severe agitation, which had the potential of placing the work *kollektiv* and employment in general in a great jeopardy. Thus, in order to show support for the new management against the central politics, workers first needed to be convinced that the new hierarchy was not yet another group of coopted individuals seeking to take control over this particular state asset. Against the background of these suspicions, workers grew to trust the new management and their proclaimed anti-corruption cause only when managers showed consistency to the cause out of their own accord.

²⁵⁴ Author interview with a female worker #5, Kochkor-Ata, November 2011.

Management *showed* commitment to the cause through various approaches. First, management had to prove to suspicious workers that they were different from the previous management by exhibiting zero tolerance to corruption. For this purpose, the new management launched their own investigation regarding the Chinese equipment and exposed more of Iskhak Pirmatov's corruption schemes. This gained them some legitimacy, but more was needed. To convince workers, the new management also committed itself to new accountability procedures. For example, new techniques were designed and introduced for a greater level of management transparency. Management established regular meetings that were aimed at informing workers of production processes. They also installed an 'information board' at the company's headquarters that displayed daily changes in primary production indicators. Anyone could access this board and receive information about the company's performance, including the amount of drilled gas and oil, their prices on the market, etc. Even employees who worked in areas not related to production, such as the college or kindergarten, were well informed of these indicators; this was displayed in the interviews. This meant that information sharing and raising awareness among employees were being executed efficiently. As one employee stated, workers have been regularly informed about what was going on at the company, from local production plans to changes in gas prices within world markets and the impact of these factors on the company.²⁵⁵ Nobody wanted to be deceived again as they had been under Pirmatov's management. Thus, transparency of management and production helped workers to be informed about the actions of new managers.

Finally, when new management streamlined production indicators and as a result was able to raise workers' wages and increase social benefits, workers felt that the anti-corruption cause not only benefitted the new management's legitimacy, but collective interests, too. Workers were convinced about the authenticity of new managers who were among the initiators of Pirmatov's ousting because the anti-corruption cause became a *collective* endeavour. This trust allowed workers

²⁵⁵ Interview with an employee #6, Kochkor-Ata, May 2013.

to relate to the new management as being their leaders and thus permitted gradually to streamline the structures of leadership and membership of the Movement for Truth.

Several other episodes contributed to this growing trust. On the one hand, the new management communicated its commitment to the cause by making their actions accountable to a local audience, inviting participants of the audience to participate in, test and follow their decisions. On the other hand, workers had an opportunity to observe the behaviour of their new management during various episodes and make conclusions about whether it was worth of following them or not. As a result of the monitoring process, management not only secured the continued commitment of existing members, but also attracted new members who had been hesitant about them in the past.

Monitoring processes not only allow for observing the behaviour of initiators of resistance, but also of rank and file members. As noted above, one of the key aspects to the successful endurance of protest movements in Kyrgyzstan is the ability of resistance groups to protect their integrity from the opportunist behaviour of brokers. The above-related episode concerning the annual meeting of shareholders highlighted the destructive effects of brokers' activities. The monitoring process allows participants to detect and eventually sideline such individuals. On my most recent trip to Kochkor-Ata in January 2015, I was informed that the primary broker, the People's Defence Committee, was no longer active. To my surprise, the head of the trade union, Raimkulov Akyn, explained that the committee had recently integrated too many people with different interests and intentions, which had compromised the committee's reputation. Taking into consideration the importance of the public reputation for the movement, it was then decided to move the head of the committee away to a different production site and close down the organization. In this way, the union's role grew to become central to the organization of the movement.

Collective empowerment via belief in the success of collective action

I argued in Chapter III that the production of trust is a necessary step to make if a provisional protest group aspires to sustain its mobilizations. The production of trust is a necessary and costly condition, but is not the only factor needed for such endeavour. In addition to increasing trust in the initiators of the movement, commitment to the cause has a better chance of being successful if individuals believe in the success of collective action. Again, belief in the success of collective action can be best tracked and explored within group processes. Hirsch (1990) contends that actual episodes of mobilization are such group processes that either enhance or decrease belief in success and efficiency of collective action.

In Kochkor-Ata, the Movement for Truth produced a large volume of collective action and an impressive record of victories. During the period from 2010 and 2014, the movement was successful in safeguarding the popularly-elected management against numerous attempts by central agencies to unseat it (with Omurzakov being the exception), winning the lawsuit concerning the Chinese equipment, effecting the advantageous purchase of the 'Kyrgyz Petroleum Company' refinery factory and offsetting attempts to split another refinery located in Batken Province, among others. Hirsch (1990) notes that actual protest sites can show 'how many are willing to take the risks associated with challenging authority.' Instances such as these establish specific norms for participation and belonging that cannot be tested during other group processes that do not involve the risk of clashing with opponents or repression from the state. These episodes usually lead either to weakened or heightened membership and a varied readiness for further resistance. As such, these achievements contributed in various ways to the significant transformation of the workers' consciousness and their commitment. First, workers felt part of a distinct history unfolding within their town and within the company. Second, they witnessed that the movement's strategies were capable of realizing its goals and were shown that the new management was worth their continued support. Third, they realized the efficacy

of acting collectively to achieve desired results or to safeguard the status quo. This awareness grew during the learning process that I described in an earlier section. Consequently, every successful sequence of contention with opponents and every fruitful episode of collective action enhanced group empowerment and boosted further collective action.

Continuous engagement with opponents also provided endless possibilities for constructing ever-new grievances, topics of contention and opportunities. The general meetings offered workers an opportunity to make sense of external realities and raise their awareness about these realities. All employees have the right to raise issues of concern. For example, the Head of the Gas Distribution Service stated that he had recently addressed the issue of corruption among the previous executives who had served prior to the April Revolution. In doing so, he took advantage of the meeting and collected 30 signatures from worker-shareholders; however, other workers did not support his initiative. The disagreement of other workers did not discourage the head of gas distribution; he stated that he would prepare his claim better and propose it at the next hearing.²⁵⁶ Thus, grievances are constantly constructed (which is in itself a sign of a successful movement) and set the movement on a certain path, where resistance was already being carried out for the sake of resistance. This means that the movement was capable of reproduction.

Collective decision-making via a growing union

Hirsch stresses that participants are more likely to continue committing to a cause if they feel themselves to be part of collective deliberation and decision-making. The collective decision-making process enables collectives to grow as powerful social actors, in contrast to divided collectives with no established practices for discussion. In our case, such processes became possible on the basis of the growing union. Today, the local union continues to be the primary mobilization structure for protests; however, its main value stems from providing

²⁵⁶ Interview with the Head of the Gas Distribution Service, Kochkor-Ata, December 2014.

a platform for collective deliberation and decision-making. In doing so, the union achieved efficient internal organization. The company is divided into departments and each department has a union representative. These representatives serve as persons of contact and are responsible for communicating information between their departments and the union. Moreover, employees contribute 1 per cent of their salary as a membership fee to the union. In this way, the union's activities and resources are stabilized and structured. Compared to its status prior to the revolution, the role of the union has been transformed in significant ways.

In late 2014, four years following the take-over of management, the union's achievements were not only praised by employees but were also being widely observed outside of the company. In addition to its current base of 2500 members, who are all employees of the company, the head of the union claimed that he was expanding membership to other organizations and groups. Town residents who worked in other local companies or who were self-employed in local trades expressed their wishes to enrol in the union, which pushed membership numbers to 7750. The head of the union was aware of the union's power and worked toward further enhancing it. When interviewed, he confessed that he had been considering creating an independent union along the existing one, a step that would provide him with more autonomy that was needed to carry out protest actions and would remove the pressure effected by management.²⁵⁷ Presently, the union works in close cooperation with management à la Soviet-style, with the exception that the 'people's management' had itself been part of the workers' movement. Close ties between the union and management were obvious from the fact that the union did not only protect workers' rights, but also the rights of management in relation to central politics. Since the take-over by the new management, the union has made a point of delivering press releases whenever management came under attack by the central mass media and central institutions.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁷ Interview with the Head of the local union, Akynbek Raimkulov, Kohckor-Ata, December 2014.

²⁵⁸ Presently, it is too early to suggest whether we are in the presence of growing corporatism or not; workers relate to their management in the same way they relate to their leaders (as had been



Figure 5: A gas source drilling brigade at Kochkor-Ata
(© Asel Doolotkeldieva)

Returning to the topic of the newly established process of collective decision-making, the union has organized this within two areas. One concerns ‘political issues’, while the second addresses ‘technical issues’. Decision-making regarding technical issues had been the domain of the company executive, who enjoyed the trust of employees. However, the union wanted to ensure that management remained open and accountable to workers regarding significant matters and events. Employees therefore participated in the control over official biddings that took place within the company. In the interviews, workers demonstrated an awareness and pride concerning important bids that the company was able to carry out in order to acquire each year: 66 items of specialized machinery, 50 drilling pumps and a logging machine in 2013. As such, this mechanism of collective decision-making pertains to the desire of management to be accountable to workers. However, it serves other purposes, too.

the case during the Soviet era), and relate to the head of the union as another leader and organizer of social well-being.

Deliberation and decision-making regarding 'political' issues are organized by the union, but is based on the consent of all employees. Each brigade has its own informal leader, whose job consists of pre-formulating the brigade's questions/concerns and mobilizing people for general meetings. Employees can participate personally in general meetings or delegate their leaders to do so. At the end of every general meeting, collective decisions are recorded in the form of protocols. Protocols are then signed and sent to a list of individuals that make up the main power-holders of the country: the five parliamentarian factions, the Office of the Prime Minister, the Ministry of Economy and the Fund of State Property. An example of such a political issue involved the management's decision to cancel a purchase agreement between Kyrgyzneftegaz and a Chinese machinery producer, which had been achieved by the former company director. Decisions made by management that are backed by brigades have a much more significant effect on central government and a better chance to keep local autonomy vis-à-vis the centre. This issue was considered to be political, because the workers' decision regarding the purchase agreement had implications for the government. According to the head of the union, the board of management could not make a decision that contradicted collective deliberation; it could simply suggest the possibility of reviewing the collective decision and offer a new round of hearings. Hirsch notes that the process of collective deliberation plays an important role in sustaining membership within the movement:

Committed protesters may feel bound by group decisions made during such discussions, even when those decisions are contrary to their personal preferences.²⁵⁹

In summarizing this section, I described a number of group processes that included monitoring, collective empowerment, collective decision-making and learning processes, which I had already presented in the earlier section. For the purpose of clarity, I portrayed these factors as distinct processes, when in fact

²⁵⁹ Hirsch, E. (1990).

they take place simultaneously. For example, while initiators of the Movement for Truth were establishing new accountability mechanisms in order to win the trust of a larger circle of workers, other members of the movement were engaged in the exciting process of learning about protest-making and obscure central politics. Collective empowerment also goes along with collective decision-making, which can grow only if trust is continuously produced and maintained. This is not to say that local protest groups cannot resort to collective action without the creation of internal resources. Kyrgyzstani history notes an abundance of such quickly emerging and rapidly declining grassroots mobilizations. In Kochkor-Ata, too, in the aftermath of the April Revolution, a resistance group comprising various local forces was able to launch a takeover of management. Yet such episodes may have remained sporadic and limited if resistance groups did not establish a basis for sustained mobilizations that would serve as a structure of legitimate leadership and committed membership. However, conditions that surround grassroots groups can significantly complicate this process. In the context of external uncertainty, only confidence in internal organization will allow protest groups not to fall apart. This is essentially the only process that protesters can own entirely. As we have seen, this can only be effected by producing trust in initiators of resistance and subsequently creating belief in the success of collective action and establishment of mechanisms of collective deliberation.

In this empirical chapter, my aim was to present the Movement for Truth, which had been initiated by a group of politicized workers from a state oil and gas company located in the small remote town of Kochkor-Ata. During the period from 2010 and the start of 2015, the movement grew from a divided workforce to become a consolidated movement based on a growing union. To track this development, I showed how the workers' initial public demonstrations had been highly improvised, weakly conceptualized and badly strategized. However, learning from continuous engagement with opponents helped them to 'streamline'

many of these shortcomings and as a result, establish by the end of 2014 a much more organized and structured resistance.

The impact of political complexity on this learning experience cannot be underestimated. Workers had been unsure about which institutions to address regarding their issues, about who made informal decisions outside of formal regulations and where judges would ally themselves. Uncertainty about these centres of power had real implications for social mobilization in terms of form, volume and intensity. Thus, the appreciation of politics as not always easily readable but as a 'messy' entity can explain why collective meaning-making often occurs in *retrospective* and not before or even during the collective action. This is yet another reason why peripheral actors may feel confused, overwhelmed and misguided by external events. The appreciation of the difficult path they made in order to contest central decisions was a reason to take their initial bifurcated, provisional and amateurish styles of collective action more seriously.

Against the background of a complex central system of power and an uncertain environment, the volume of mobilization against various opponents is another unexpected outcome. In the following empirical chapter we will see that not all Kyrgyzstani protest movements can afford an extended repertoire of collective action and most protest groups are unable to mount their resistance against opponents beyond the level of group discussions, provisional protests or violent acts. Finally, it is significant that the workers' movement was capable of sidelining a dangerous element – brokers – and their destructive effects. In the second case study, we will see that not all grassroots groups are able to insulate their activities from individual opportunism.

Finally, this case study constitutes a successful example of the formation of a grassroots movement that was able to create internal organizational and cognitive resources. It is quite astonishing to observe this success against the initial disadvantageous background, which consisted of opaque patronage

networks, institutional uncertainty and a divided workforce. Trust in the consistency and commitment of leaders and other members of the movement is a pre-condition for collective action. In weakly organized groups, consistency and commitment to the cause can be tracked only through regular monitoring, verification and reconfirmation of the behaviour of others. Episodes of collective action and group processes, more than anything else, seem to offer such a possibility for the participants in social mobilizations. In the next chapter, I will continue exploring industrial conflicts through an example from the gold mining sector.

CHAPTER V: ANTI-MINING RURAL MOBILIZATION IN ARAL VILLAGE

I. Introduction

In March and October 2011, a foreign mining firm, Talas Copper Gold, twice came under violent attack by residents of the Aral village in Talas Province. The area subjected to mining operations infringes upon farming and pasturage fields. Prior to the escalation of conflict, the group of residents put forward their environmental and economic grievances against the exploration project at the Taldy Bulak mine. Sharing ecological grievances, hundreds of individuals attended the initial episodes of mobilization. Thus, environmental risks posed to the Taldy Bulak area, even at an explorative phase, became the core issue of non-violent contention between a large group of residents of Aral village, the foreign miners and the Kyrgyzstani state between 2010 and 2011.

However, soon enough residents grew suspicious towards the organizers of the anti-mining resistance. The ground for these suspicions was the ambivalent agenda that the initiators of resistance pursued under an environmental cause. For while, on the one hand, their actions aimed to publicly criticize the mining firm, this was incompatible with, on the other hand, the aim of gaining informal benefits from the firm. Thus, residents were not sure whether the anti-mining mobilization was a genuine expression of grievances against the miners or a call for co-optation. In other words, it was unclear whether the environmental cause served public or private interests. In addition, these initiators were involved in a parallel struggle for power within local politics and employed the mining project as the main point of critique against the incumbent local government. Watching after these ambiguous actions by the organizers of the resistance, residents gradually developed distrust towards them and began refusing to further participate in actions against the miners. The failure to construct a sustainable resistance led the initiators to change their tactics from peaceful gatherings to violent attacks against the company. This escalation of conflict, however, brought about the fragmentation of social interactions among residents and caused further demobilization.

In this empirical chapter I would like to investigate the social mobilization that involved rural residents, the foreign investor, and the state. As in the previous empirical case, I am interested in understanding the trajectory of mobilization and the role of trust in securing a sustainable organization of resistance. Secondly, as in the previous chapter there seems to be a strong interconnection between 'politics' and 'environment' that affects the nature of the organization of resistance. Usually, making a distinction between politics and environment does not make much sense because environment becomes 'relevant' when and if only it is politicized on the level of public discussion and decision-making. However, as the story develops we will see that actors resorted to various types of politics to advance environmental concerns at different periods of the conflict. The types of politics involved here concern the 'traditional' struggle for power (informal politics) on the one hand and public deliberation (open politics) on the other. If under the former, the management of natural resources is employed merely as a cover and not the primary cause of struggle, under the latter mining has a potential to become a subject of public policy. Kyrgyzstani citizens have traditionally referred to the former and dominant type of politics as a political game (*ouyn*). The complication in such cases is of course when environmental claims are pursued on the level of both open politics and informal politics.

Second, since the dynamics of mobilization seem to be tightly correlated to these divergent political dynamics, it will be important to track how exactly participants discover and make sense of these divergences. In other words, I will be looking at how the observations of polar political dynamics (open politics on the one hand and the struggle for power on the other hand) influence people's decisions to participate (or not) in mobilization. Here I would like to uncover the moments and places in which individuals make observations of political dynamics and as a consequence form personal and collective opinions about the worthiness of participating in mobilization.

Third, this case of social mobilization differs from my first empirical case in the ways the initiators of mobilization did not succeed in constructing a sustainable

structure of resistance. In other words, I am dealing here with a failed case. Why the study of a failed case is important in comparison to the successful case? The failed case is more likely to track those instances in which the construction of a sustainable organization of mobilization collapsed and is thus in a better position to gauge the validity of hypotheses posed in the dissertation.

With these points in mind, my research agenda in this empirical chapter consists of exploring the relationship between the environment and different types of politics that produce social practices of contestation and the outcomes of collective action. My goal is to investigate how the interplay between open and informal politics conditions the delicate formation of group mobilization on environmental issues. In developing this argument, I structure my analysis in the following way. First, after a long introduction I draw attention to the place of environmental contention. Here, I am interested in developing the dynamics between the protesting group and the two opponents, i.e., the company and the state. Thus, I will describe the primary stages of mobilization and show how initiators of resistance engaged with the state through institutional means and attempted to mobilize fellow residents through large public gatherings. In the second part of the chapter I begin addressing the puzzle of the unexpected decline of mobilization. Here I will explore the reason of demobilization that are to be found, contrary to certain assumptions, in the dynamics of open politics that have unexpectedly emerged out of public gatherings. I will demonstrate how village gatherings led to the exposure of the ambivalent agenda that some of the anti-mining critics pursued informally next to their publicly propagated environmental claims. In the third part of the chapter I will show the ways in which exposure works through public scrutiny and monitoring. I will illustrate how the mismatch between private interests and publicly shared environmental claims becomes available for observation among wider circles of residents. In the final part, I will discuss some of the consequences of this exposure on the trajectory of mobilization and local politics. Here, I will demonstrate the ways public exposure created suspicion and distrust, which in return led to a decline in participation. I will also discuss the consequent fragmentation of the local political space and the

inability of residents to act together in relation to the post-arson enforced cooperation with the miners.

These issues shall be addressed in turn below. I begin, however, by turning to the discussion of existing approaches to social mobilizations; then to the national and regional contexts that are helpful for understanding Aral mobilization within a wider picture; and finally to a chronology of major events in Aral village.

1.1. Existing approaches to social mobilizations and the politics of natural resources in Kyrgyzstan

Central Asian scholarship has advanced in the past decade various hypotheses to explain rural mobilization, especially in the sphere of mining conflicts. In this part of the introduction I will discuss four explanations: a class-based analysis, an institutional approach, 'eco-mobilizeability' and an elite-centred thesis.

One of the possibilities to understand current mining conflicts is to view them through the lens of class struggle. A number of practitioners in the mining area (both investors and environmental NGOs) tend to frame mining conflicts as a result of domination of interests of the local rich over other social groups.²⁶⁰ In Aral, the category of the rich would concern the large group of farmers whose lands and pastures were exposed to changes under the explorative activities. Unwilling to compromise their source of income, they would turn their fellow residents against the mining company. This view stipulates that the conservative rich already have a stable income and are not interested in other, riskier, sources. The problem with such an assumption is that this group of farmers is in fact highly heterogeneous and can hardly represent the village's rich men and women. Most of the landlords in fact do not farm since they critically lack the input such as fertilizers, seeds and machinery. While waiting for better farming

²⁶⁰ Interviews with representatives of Andash Mining and Talas Gold Mining companies that have operated in Andash and Jeroy deposits respectively (Talas province), Bishkek, 2013. Conversations with Kalia Moldogazieva (Tree of Life) and Natalia Ablova (EITI Supervisory Board), Bishkek, 2015.

opportunities, these landlords nevertheless put pressure on the foreign firm. But does their activism signify a clash of lifestyles grounded in class? In times of economic depression, when income is hardly stable and land is not a readily convertible value, the application of such class analysis is a little problematic. Thus the translation of interests of rebellious actors into the class interests is not an answer to our puzzle but certainly a complication.

Institutional weakness has become one of the prominent explanations for all sorts of structural conflicts in this post-communist state. In regard to mining conflicts and environmental movements, a number of local scholars have advanced that state weakness had led to an adequate management of natural resources and to a weak control over the operations of mining investors. The Eurasia Foundation has found in their country survey that one of the major reasons of social discontent is the lack of communications between miners and local communities. The lack of exchange of information between the two leads to misunderstandings and misperceptions among local communities.²⁶¹ Another study by the National Institute for Strategic Studies supports this view and believes the major source of local discontent to be the non-transparency of mining operations and a lack of communications between miners and communities.²⁶² Elmira Nogoibaeva discovered that the absence of successful mining examples and the memory of environmental disasters are another factor that informs residents' negative attitudes towards new mining projects.²⁶³ In my case, I also found that the perceived weakness of state regulatory institutions lead to increased risk

²⁶¹ *Oxus International*, (2013) *Extracting sentiments: The effect of mining exploration and extraction on eight communities in the Kyrgyz Republic*, Bishkek.

²⁶² A number of reports highlight this problematic: Gullette, D. (2013) 'Conflict sensitivity in the mining sector of the Kyrgyz Republic', *OSCE Academy*, Bishkek; *National Strategic Research Institute of the Kyrgyz Republic* [NSRI KR], (2013) *Faktory negativnogo (nepriyaznennogo) otnosheniya mestnogo naseleniya k investoram, razrabotchikam mestorozhdenii poleznykh iskopaevykh, vzaimootnosheniya nedropol'zovatelei i mestnykh soobshchestv* [Factors of the local population's negative (hostile) attitudes towards investors, developers of mineral deposits, and the relationship between subsoil users and local communities], Bishkek.

²⁶³ Nogoibaeva, E. (2016) 'Zoloto Batkena. Socialno-kulturnye aspekty vzaimodeistvia mestnykh soobshchestv i investorov v KR: (po rezul'tatom polevykh issledovaniy na primere Batkenskoi oblasti v sfere izvlecheniya i ispol'zovaniya prirodnih resursov)', Bishkek, 2016. ['The gold of Batken. Socio-cultural aspects of relationships between local communities and investors in Kyrgyz Republic: based on fieldwork research in Batken province in the sphere of natural resources extraction].

perceptions among residents exposed to new mining experiences. To these I also add another important factor; the authoritarian legacy. I suggest that miners' non-transparent operations during authoritarian regimes have led to situations in which the local control over mining has become a source of jealousies, rumours and competition between local factions.²⁶⁴ Competition for gold resources further produces ever-new rounds of informal politics whose workings are not clear to ordinary residents. In addition, residents cannot keep up with complex information and knowledge that extraction entails against the background of weak local institutions and 'the absence' of the central state.²⁶⁵ In my empirical chapter, I discuss the inefficiency and weakness of state institutions and the regime legacy for understanding why and how conflicts erupt in this sphere.

Another popular explanation of current mining and environmental mobilizations is the elite-centred approach. Although anthropologists studying Central Asia have numerous highlighted the role of natural resources in local socio-economic, political and spiritual culture,²⁶⁶ the elite-centred approach implies that natural resources are a residual category of elite struggle and manipulation. The role of local and national elites in supporting and sponsoring contentious claims within other contexts of 'resource' conflicts has been highlighted in the recent literature. Amanda Wooden explains: 'elites sometimes use environmental concerns to motivate people, organize pseudo-green political actions, or co-opt environmentally related demonstrations.'²⁶⁷ Thurman (2002) notes, for example,

²⁶⁴ This chapter does not have the necessary scope to discuss the mining politics that served the authoritarian crony regimes of Akaev and the Bakievs. For examples of corruption and money-laundering in the extractive industry during the era of the Bakievs, see Doolot, A. and Heathershaw, J. (2015) 'State as resource, mediator and performer: understanding the local and global politics of gold mining in Kyrgyzstan', *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 34, no.1, March, pp. 93-110.

²⁶⁵ Local institutions such as local councils (*ayil kenesh*) and local administration (*ayil okmot*) that have been until recently stripped of real power. In 2013, the government initiated the so-called 'territorial-administrative reform' in which the decision-making was reduced from a triple level (central bureaucracy-regional administration-local administration) to a double level (central bureaucracy-local administration). Although local institutions have received leverage on some of the issues concerning industry but they cannot exploit fully their potential due to being understaffed, lacking knowledge and information.

²⁶⁶ Inogamova-Hanbury, Z. (2015), p. 200; Bichsel, C. (2009), p. 57; Reeves, M. (2014a), p. 61.

²⁶⁷ Wooden, A. (2013).

that the rich in rural Central Asia use their social position to improve their water supplies. When it comes to extraction resources, a number of mining companies have advanced that members of national elite were behind the competing companies and community discontent. This important thesis draws our attention to informal politics on which Central Asian societies run and function.

Although one cannot disagree with Reeves' observation that the Kyrgyzstani contexts are 'increasingly dominated by the interests of local patrons who perceived themselves to be above the law'²⁶⁸, there are problems with the elite-manipulated thesis as such. It ends up silencing other, non-elite, interests and grievances that are crucial for understanding social mobilizations. Wooden, who conducted a public opinion survey in 2009, figured important individual environmental philosophies behind the 'eco-mobilizeability' in Kyrgyzstan.²⁶⁹ Countering the elite-centred approach, she has identified a complex set of variables in an attempt to explain environmental activism in Kyrgyzstan. These include blame specificity, problem salience, individual environmental philosophy and environmental behaviours. These variables would perfectly echo perceptions and attitudes of ordinary residents who view their Talas province as a place of ecological agricultural production.

Yet, although environmental concerns are significant in the Kyrgyzstani contexts of mining, these variables might intersect in many unexpected ways and produce varying outcomes, all of which are dependent on local contexts. Most importantly, the 'eco-mobilizeability' explanation does not solve the question of power when it comes to Kyrgyzstani mining conflicts in which actors involved can easily divert the environmental theme to cover up power games. The issue of power cannot be discarded from mining conflicts. It would be a mistake to assume that it is possible to separate the possibility of political manipulation and the domination of

²⁶⁸ Reeves, M. (2014c) 'The time of the border: Contingency, conflict, and popular statism at the Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Boundary', in Reeves, M., Rosanayagam, J. and Beyer, J. *Ethnographies of the state in Central Asia: Performing politics*, Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, p. 203.

²⁶⁹ Wooden, A. (2013).

materialistic interests from natural resources (or any other topic) in the context of impoverished rural areas and harsh neo-liberal measures. Whereas the institutional approach is focused too much on structural factors, the elite approach is over-deterministic of the role of informal actors, the class thesis is less sensitive to political dynamics. The task ahead, then, is to find an analytical and conceptual model in which power interests and social concerns are not mutually excluded but explored under a complex interplay of local politics.

Studying this case of social mobilization including the actors, grievances and agendas involved was a daunting task. How to account for incidents of informal politics if the very essence of such politics is secrecy? How to make sense of actors' veiled intentions and strategies if, in addition, the volume of surrounding rumours complicates the analysis? My successive field trips are a great illustration of these difficulties. As I was paying visits to Aral village and Talas oblast in various years, I was consecutively exposed to different local narratives about what happened between the miner and residents. For example, at the early stage of my research local institutions such *ayil okmot* (village administration), *ayil kenesh* (village council), women and aksakal (the elders') councils were reluctant to talk to me or kept formal accounts of events. In summer 2012, six months after the community has reached a post-conflict agreement with the company the favorite narrative circulating among residents was the 'third forces' explanation. According to this account, 'external' actors that did not belong to the community carried out the attack on the company's geological camp. The external actors abstractly included members of the central elite, competitive mining firms and criminals. Later in 2014, this narrative was replaced by more moderate explanations. During my recent trips in 2014 and 2015, residents showed a greater acceptance of these events and attributed the guilt on specific individuals rather than on mysterious third forces. This was due partly to changes in local personnel and the removal of several anti-mining critics from the position of power. These changes in the local mosaic of power distribution have allowed a number of former officials to speak freely about the past events. Thus some

residents explained the anti-mining mobilization as a residual result of the struggle for power among local factions. Others were still confused unable to make sense of informal politics and contradicting rumours. The anti-mining critics themselves viewed their activities as a work of opposition.

These changing economies of interests have also translated into the complications in access to information. Multiple activists refused to give interview whereas the removal of several leading figures has reduced the number of my informants. My accounts of the organization of resistance were therefore based primarily on personal interviews with one chief organizer, Sabyr Mamytov,²⁷⁰ and other provisional participants within the episodes of mobilization. I also used records and protocols of public gatherings that Sabyr Mamytov has carefully kept in his home archive.

1.2. National and regional contexts of resource extraction

The attacks on Talas Copper Gold took place amid complex national, regional and local contexts. Kyrgyzstan is the CIS's third largest gold producer, after Russia and Uzbekistan. Large-scale gold mining is the country's primary export commodity and accounted for 30% of total exports in 2011.²⁷¹ With more than 60 gold deposits discovered (containing 448 tonnes of gold), only five mines are currently active, but even these make up more than 80% of incomes from the entire mining sector.²⁷² Against this economic background, social insurgency against the extractive industry becomes particularly important for the country and for its significance to protest themes. As Wooden (2013) correctly observed, 'since 2010, anti-gold mining protests have reached the national level and have become regular and sustained across the country, against mines in every province.' According to the National Agency of Geology and Mineral Resources, in 2012, there were more than 40 conflicts related to gold-mining projects in

²⁷⁰ The names of respondents are changed for their protection.

²⁷¹ Doolot, A. and Heathershaw, J. (2015).

²⁷² Bogdetsky, V., Ibraev, K. and Abdyrakhmanova, J. (2005).

Kyrgyzstan.²⁷³

One reason why many projects in the country's provinces have been halted at the explorative stage is linked to the controversial example of the largest gold production project, Kumtor in Issik-kul oblast, eastern Kyrgyzstan. In 1996, Kumtor, with reserves of more than 300 tonnes of metal and a production capacity of 650 thousand ounces per year, began production. However, following a cyanide spillage in 2002 and the involvement of high-ranked Kyrgyzstani state officials in corruption,²⁷⁴ this gold mine turned into an epicentre of political controversies and local contention. According to Charles Buxton, this event also initiated a nation-wide environmental movement.²⁷⁵ Controversies regarding Kumtor have provoked considerable political debate within the country regarding the nature of such developments for society and the environment, the absence of appropriate public participation and consultation, decision-making and regulatory processes, as well as concerns about the impacts of extractive industries on glaciers and wildlife. More recently, political disputes concerning Kumtor have even led to an attempt of unconstitutional overthrow of the government in the fall of 2011.²⁷⁶ In October 2011, the political party Ata-Jurt initiated peaceful demonstrations in favour of the nationalization of Kumtor, which led to appeals for the takeover of 'power'.²⁷⁷ These events gave a new impetus to a local mobilization in Saruu village (Issik-kul Province), which went as far as taking the provincial governor hostage and extorting financial compensation from Centerra Gold, the Kumtor operator. The subsequent major governmental crackdown of this anti-Kumtor local opposition in October 2013 was meant to show a 'formalization' effort of state control and the political disciplining of other anti-

²⁷³ *State Agency of Geology and Mineral Resources*, (2013) [Online], Available at: <http://www.geology.kg/mineral/data> [20 February 2013].

²⁷⁴ On corruption in the mining sector see *Research Institute Fraser*, (2011) Annual reports on global mining [Online], Available at: www.fraserinstitute.org [20 February 2013].

²⁷⁵ Buxton, C. (2011), p.62.

²⁷⁶ For a full account of the Kumtor crisis see Gullette, D. and Kalybekova, A. (2014) 'Agreement under pressure: Gold mining and protests in the Kyrgyz Republic', *Friedrich Ebert Foundation*, Bishkek.

²⁷⁷ Doolotkeldieva, A. 'Kyrgyz nationalist leader routed', *IWPR* (19 October 2012), [Online], Available at: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/kyrgyz-nationalist-leader-routed> [23 August 2015].

mining activities across the country.

Talas Province,²⁷⁸ in which Aral village and the Taldy Bulak mine are located, can be considered as the bedrock of anti-mining resistance, independent of Kumtor. The first peak of anti-mining protests in Talas Province coincided with the democratic openings in the aftermath of the Tulip Revolution, between 2005 and 2007. The second peak occurred in the aftermath of the April Revolution, between 2010 and 2013. In these areas, local opposition demanded for a better government control or even the nationalization of gold mines (Buxton, 2011: 92). It appears that the two revolutions served as powerful triggers for mobilizing local populations on natural resources, which served as opportunities for opposing central policies and changing local orders. Some of these resistance efforts were successful. As a result of local resistance, for example, the Andash Project has been suspended since June 2011 and the Jerooy Project was reopened only recently, in June 2015.

For Aral, contributing to the propagation of anti-mining resistance was particularly influential in terms of informal connections between Talas and Issik-kul opposition groups,²⁷⁹ as well as for the dissemination of press and video materials about environmental violations by Ata-Jurt party. Yet, although national images and regional informal networks are important for propagating extractive resistance, Wooden (2013) rightly argues that 'eco-mobilizeability' is a place-based phenomenon, so 'subnational differences in protest occurrence and participation matter.' This brings us to the local context, i.e. Aral village, where open contestation of a foreign miner took place between 2010 and 2012.

1.3. Local context and chronology of major events in Aral

²⁷⁸ Talas Province is an oblast in northern Kyrgyzstan with its capital being the town of Talas. With an approximate population of 220 000, its primary economic resources are gold and the agricultural production of beans and potatoes. See Wikipedia [Online], Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talas_Region [23 July 2015].

²⁷⁹ The scope of this chapter does not allow for further developing this intriguing theme; I nonetheless have to note that the learning process in Aral had been stimulated by the sharing of experiences with anti-mining 'activists' from other sites within the country.

Talas Copper Gold came to Talas in 2005 under an official license to explore the Taldy Bulak gold and copper deposit. The company was originally a joint venture between Gold Fields, a subsidiary of South African assets and Orsu Metals, a British corporation. In July 2012, Orsu Metals sold Gold Fields its 40% stake in Talas Copper Gold and Gold Fields became the sole owner of the exploration license. Only 15 km from the Andash mine, the Taldy Bulak deposit is located on the southern slope of the Kyrgyz range on the right bank of the Karakol River, in the basin of the Taldybulak stream. The State Agency of Geology and Mineral Resources estimates gold and copper reserves in Taldy Bulak to be 120 tonnes and 80 000 tonnes, respectively, which makes the mine one of the largest deposits in the country.²⁸⁰



Figure 6: Location of Aral village, Talas Province, Northern Kyrgyzstan

Aral village is located 4,5 km from the Taldy-Bulak mine and hosts a population of 4000.²⁸¹ Judith Beyer writes that Aral is divided into two parts, upper and lower Aral, which is noted by ‘the fact that there are two schools, two pharmacies and two mosques in the village – one for each side.’²⁸² This division of the village is also political. Although organizers of the anti-mining resistance have officially framed their activities as representing the attitudes of the entire Aral population

²⁸⁰ State Agency of Geology And Mineral Resources, [Online], Available at: <http://www.geology.kg> [15 June 2015].

²⁸¹ *Talas rayonu, Aral Ayil okmotunun pasportu* [Talas district, passport of the Aral village government], (2015).

²⁸² Beyer, J. (2011) ‘Settling descent: place making and genealogy in Talas, Kyrgyzstan’, *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 30, nos. 3-4, September-December, pp. 455-468.

(*Aral eli*), resistance has primarily involved ‘members’ of the Chokoi line of descent.²⁸³ The implication of this *uruu* was due to two reasons: the Chokoi’s lands were being subjected to mining operations among the lands of other *uruus* and the primary organizers of resistance were descendants of the Chokoi. During the early independence years, 73 families of the Chokoi *uruu* were allocated land plots in the Taldy Bulak area, which today constitutes an important if not their primary source of income.²⁸⁴ Thus, members of the Chokoi and organizers of anti-mining resistance claimed that explorative operations had led to decreased harvests and the death of animal stocks, and claimed that these operations presented major risks for wildlife in the area.

The ‘core group’ of mining critics were known to many residents and involved mainly such individuals as the former school director and her husband (the former head of *ayil kenesh*), the head of the commission ‘on removing the company’, the current head of *ayil okmot*, the head of a local association Beishe Ata, several local council deputies and small local entrepreneurs such as grocery shop owners. They called themselves anti-mining ‘activists’.

According to the accounts of Sabyr Mamytov, the head of Beishe Ata association, they began opposing to mining in 2007, when some of them became part of an informal opposition movement against the Bakievs’ regime. Sabyr Mamytov was, for example, delegated from the upper Talas district to attend a secret opposition gathering in Arashan village (Chui oblast) organized by the founder of the SDPK party and current President Almazbek Atambaev. Following this meeting, Sabyr Mamytov became part of an organization called ‘Support to Revolution’ as a representative from the Talas district.

²⁸³ I refer to Chokoi *uruu* in the way that actors themselves employ it.

²⁸⁴ Sabyr Mamytov writes that next to Chokoi, other *uruus* also have land plots in the Taldy Bulak area such as Tolobai, Kalmak and Iygilik. See his official letter to the Talas District Administration, dated 24 February 2009. Beyer writes that after the disintegration of the kolkhoz system, land plots were distributed among residents according to the *uruu* principle. See Beyer, J. (2011).

As I understood from his account, their opposition to the mining company was boosted by their membership in opposition to the regime.²⁸⁵ At the end of 2007, Sabyr Mamytov and other members had already written official complaints to various regional and central agencies about the wrongdoings of the *ayil okmot* and *ayil kenesh*. In 2008, they formed a ‘group of control’ with the objective of defending the farmers’ rights and interests against the mining company’s operation on their lands. In February 2009, at their urge, the central government formed a special commission to verify the activities of *ayil okmot* in relation to mining.²⁸⁶ By that time they became members of diverse local and regional associations that sprung informally in opposition to the incumbent regime. Not surprisingly, when the demise of the Bakiev’s regime began Sabyr Mamytov and other residents from Aral have participated in the regional uprising in Talas town on 6 April 2010 that set the tone for a national rebellion against the regime.

Following the demise of regime and the all-consuming revolutionary mood, the anti-mining activists returned to their village to begin mobilization against the miner. On 9 April 2010, a large crowd marched on the camp with slogans reading ‘*Kompania ketsin!*’ – a statement imploring the removal of the company from the area. Arrived at the geological camp, they demanded the management of Talas Copper Gold to turn down all activities and remove their equipment in due time. The statement was even signed by the *rayion akim*, the head of district administration, not counting the present heads of local institutions. The activists organized another four large gatherings to demand the removal of the company yet to no avail.

²⁸⁵ See very rare news reports: ‘Talas raionunda Aral ayil okmotunun bashchysynyn mamlekettik mulktu tuura emes paidalangan dep ayiptashuuda’ [in Aral village of Talas district, the head of ayil okmot is accused of misuse of state property], *Azattyk* (10 November 2007) Available at: <http://www.azattyk.org/archive/ky-news/20071213/828/828.html?id=1273408> [15 July 2015].

²⁸⁶ The commission’s response to Ismailov and Sabyr Mamytov, 11 February 2009. The commission consisted of the Talas Regional Financial Police, Talas Regional Department of Agriculture and Construction, Talas Regional Department of Emergency and representatives of the Central Agency for Local Self-Government. In their conclusion, the commission stated that the then head of the village administration did not provide complete information about the company’s social assistance and financial reports. However, the commission’s finding did not satisfy the activists’ demands.

The apogee of their anti-mining activities was a violent turn. The company's camp was attacked and set on fire on two occasions, in March and October 2011. The first attack on the company took place on 11 March, 2011. By this time, the company was not complying with demands and was undertaking measures necessary to win back cooperation of residents. While the company initially agreed to retract from the mine and even transferred part of its equipment to Talas, it also introduced a special liaison person who was responsible for repairing the company's relationship with the community. The liaison person has, however, gained a bad reputation for having co-opted residents through various offers of employment and thus interfering with plans of the anti-mining activists. The company also established a local office – something that was deemed unnecessary during the previous authoritarian regime as all lucrative projects were decided in the centre.

On 11 March 2011, residents gathered at the company's local office in order to clarify its employment policy. According to a number of participants, they were promised employment and were placed on the company's employment list. Residents considered the creation of an employment list as part of the company's strategy to stay in the area.²⁸⁷ While the crowd continued to grow near the office, some participants began galvanizing people to go to the camp. They shouted, 'If you are men, then let's go to the camp!' Participants then began mobilizing and moving toward the camp. Upon their arrival, residents demanded that Company Director Morozov talk to them. However, only geologists were present at the camp and residents were not given answers to their questions. At some point, amid the agitation and frustration of participants, the company's premises were set on fire.

²⁸⁷ Although I do not discuss in length the investor's strategies to remain at the mine and win back cooperation of residents, it is clear that the company's politics prior and after the revolution played a role in the trajectory of mobilization.

It is unclear whether the arson had been accidental or a purposeful act. According to Sabyr Mamytov who had been present at the camp that day, the arson was an accident that happened because the premises had been constructed of wood and was therefore easily inflammable. Some participants say they did not plan or know that their march would end violently. Some of them even regretted being part of that march: the lack of experience regarding the organization of peaceful demonstrations had led to a loss of control among agitated individuals.²⁸⁸ The company staff, however, noted that it was nonetheless a well-organized mobilization, because people had been bussed to and from the camp and alcoholic beverages had been generously distributed among them.²⁸⁹ Representatives of the police and the security services who were at the camp, together with other participants, did not prevent the incident.²⁹⁰

In the aftermath of the arson, village authorities issued an official statement in which they condemned the attack and prescribed that the attackers compensate for the damage caused. Special security services established heavy surveillance on the resistance organizers, which successfully caused the defection of a number of anti-mining activists. The wife of one activist stated that one of the reasons she and her husband defected had been the difficulty of withstanding the pressures stemming from police and security services.²⁹¹ While the police did not intervene during the actual episodes of mobilization and violent attacks, they became very active in-between these episodes. According to the activists, local police and special security officers exploited citizens' resistance as an opportunity to extort money from the company and hence turn a blind eye to citizens' complaints.²⁹² The extent of surveillance and informal pressures exerted

²⁸⁸ Interview with a participant #1, Aral, August 2012.

²⁸⁹ Interview with the employees of the Talas Copper Gold, August 2012, Bishkek.

²⁹⁰ Erica Marat wrote about the current state of police in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and convincingly found that 'alienated police officers might be able to decrease levels of crime, but the institution often loses its capacity to predict and prevent any escalation of tensions and mobilization among disaffected groups'. See Marat, E. (2014) 'Policing public protest in Central Asia', *Central Asia Affairs*, vol.1, no.1, pp. 5-23.

²⁹¹ Interview with the wife of an activist, Aral, November 2014.

²⁹² This is in line with many expert evaluations of the Kyrgyzstani law enforcement bodies as increasingly politicized, corrupt and disconnected from society. See Lewis, D. (2011)

on participants in grassroots mobilizations is another aspect to the difficult protest-making process in Kyrgyzstan. As opposed to direct repression, aftermath covert operations by the law enforcing bodies played a crucial role in intimidating and demobilizing activists.

Notwithstanding police surveillance and official condemnation of the first attack, on 7 November 2011, the mining camp was subjected to a second violent attack. The second arson committed at the geological camp took place on the night between 7 and 8 October, 2011. A small group of young men on horses, armed with sticks and combustibles, attacked security personnel and set the premises on fire. As a result of this assault, one guard was hospitalized and the damage caused to the company's property was estimated at more than 3 MLN som (approximately 60 000 USD). While the first arson took place in the presence of a large group of people, all of whom had demands related to employment policy, the second attack was carried out during the night and away from public attention. No demands were made and no clear interests from any large group were visible. The mode by which the second violence was carried out led the company to view the second attack as different from the first. Within its own investigation, it concluded that the second attack had most likely been carried out by a group of residents vying for power. According to the findings of the investigation, the group targeted the mining company because in the context of upcoming local elections it viewed the company's position as informally supportive of incumbent village authorities.²⁹³ I will return to the crucial point of competition for power in the third part of the chapter.

The ambiguous role of local administration and local institutions such as the women and elders' councils is also interesting to note in this story. In the official press release regarding the attack made by *ayil okmot* and *ayil kenesh*, the head of *ayil kenesh* declared:

'Reassessing the role of OSCE Police Assistance Programming in Central Asia', *Open Society Institute*, Occasional Paper Series no. 4.

²⁹³ Personal communication with an anonymous expert, Bishkek, 2013.

This incident doesn't reflect in any way the interests of Aral residents. Residents consider that the individuals who carried out this crime acted exclusively according to their own vested interests and that their actions do not promote community development.²⁹⁴

Following the official condemnation of the arson by local and district authorities, young perpetrators were arrested and taken away to Bishkek. The arrest of young people caused new agitation in the village, as the families of those arrested began mobilizing village officials and the elders' court. The families of the arrested put pressure on activists to drop all actions against the company. In November 2011, village authorities even convened a general assembly, *kurultay*, in order to discuss the situation and find ways to free fellow residents. Approximately 500 people took part in the *kurultay* alongside representatives of all local institutions. Participants decided to allow the company to continue operating under its exploration license until December 2015. In exchange, they officially asked the company to provide court assistance to liberate the arrested residents. Following the resolution, on 9 December 2011, the company and the local and regional authorities signed a triple cooperation agreement.²⁹⁵ Village authorities even went to Bishkek and met with various officials in order to establish communication regarding a new era of established relationships with the company.²⁹⁶

²⁹⁴ 'Mestnoe naselenie ne imeet nikakogo otnoshenia k napadeniu na geologicheskoy lager OcoO 'Talas Copper Gold' [Local population doesn't have any relationship to the attack on the geological camp of the 'Talas Copper Gold Company], *Talas Copper Gold* (10 October 2011) Available at: <http://tcg.kg/images/files/press-release/press-reliz-10-oktyabrya-2011.pdf> [4 February 2014].

²⁹⁵ The resolution of the *kurultay* of the Aral village community was dated 9 December 2011. In December 2013, Gold Fields sold its license to another foreign investor, Australian Robust Resources, for reasons unrelated to communal resistance. In the same year, Robust Resources purchased the Andash deposit, located closely to Taldy Bulak, another protracted site of communal resistance. The change of investors in Taldy Bulak occurred almost unnoticed in the village and no visible resistance was shown to the new mining agent yet.

²⁹⁶ When the community reached a post-arson settlement with the mining company and asked regional state institutions to play a role as witness, it was an act aimed at 'bringing the state back' to bilateral interaction and hence, voluntarily enacting the state's presence in the village. This was also surprising, taking into consideration that residents used to previously disregard directives stemming from district and provincial authorities. Interestingly, this selective approach toward activating or deactivating the relationship with the centre displays how conflicts work at the periphery.

This short chronology of events exhibits quite a complex situation in which revolutionary shifts, longstanding grievances against elites and local economies coincide to produce localized rebellions against foreign investors. It may appear that violence is a predominant path of resistance as attacks on geological camps have spread across Kyrgyzstani mines. The proliferation of violence in the mining sphere suggests that this type of response can be included in the current repertoire of collective action and that it represents citizens' frustration that see 'no other way' of gaining attention. However, the use of violence is not the first option in the long chain of events. In the next part of the chapter, I will demonstrate what has preceded the violent turn.

II. Rising Mobilization

During the period between April 2010 - the beginning of the mobilization - and March 2011, the moment of the first violent attack on the miner, the anti-mining activists launched an impressive record of attempts made to oust the company. These attempts took different forms, starting with the activation of central institutions and the mobilization of large public gatherings. These represent locally available typical resources and mechanisms that helped individuals to form collective action. I will discuss the major instruments of resistance in order: institutional channels and local public gatherings.

2.1. Institutional means of contestation: state irresponsiveness

Against the background of popular images of the anti-mining activists as galvanized crowd riding on horseback to smash camps, writing official complaints and mobilizing state institutions was the major instrument of contestation in Aral. They directed complaints to specialized state institutions such as the Ministry of Natural Resources and the National Agency for Local Self-Governance. They also addressed to the highest hierarchy, i.e. the Head of the Interim Government and the Speaker of Parliament. In a letter to Head of the Interim Government Rosa Otunbaeva on May 2010, the organizers referred to the collective resolution

of 9 April 2010 and demanded complete closure of the mine. They grounded this demand on the basis of environmental violations:

Many birds, insects, fish and frogs have disappeared. Many rare flowers and trees have dried out. Because the company used water streams for their mining activities, many farmers suffered from drought and consequently saw a decrease in their harvests. Pastures were destroyed and cattle died.²⁹⁷

They repeated their demands in a renewed letter to Otunbaeva and to Ahmatbek Keldibekov, Speaker of the Parliament dated 16 December, 2010, in which they foreground other grievances related to domination and dispossession:

The company worked only with the power-holders and law enforcement bodies while completely ignoring ordinary people. The company exposed the Kyrgyz as a backward people (*bechara*) ready to sell their souls for two pennies.²⁹⁸

The administration of the interim government only responded on 15 March, 2011, 10 months after the letter had been sent, in which it informed the residents that their case had been delegated to the Ministry of Natural Resources and the Talas regional administration. However, these two institutions had already responded earlier that the company against whom the residents were seeking political support was a well-established global miner and that the actions taken against it did not conform to the national legislation.²⁹⁹ Hence, the two institutions to whom the interim government redirected the case refused to say anything new beyond their earlier responses.

The experience of confronting state institutions led residents to put special emphasis on the double 'effect of the state', to use Mitchel's term³⁰⁰, that is, the state's perceived 'unresponsiveness' and 'complicity' with foreign economic actors. Activists complained that the state 'system' was malfunctioning: letters

²⁹⁷ Letter to the head of Interim government, Rosa Otunbaeva, 10 May 2010, [Aral].

²⁹⁸ Letter to the head of Interim government, Rosa Otunbaeva, 16 December 2010, [Aral].

²⁹⁹ Letters from the Ministry of Natural Resources from 27 December 2010 and Talas regional administration from 13 January 2011.

³⁰⁰ See Mitchel, T. (1991) 'The limits of the state: Beyond statist approaches and their critics', *American Political Science Review*, vol. 85, no. 1, March, pp. 77-96.

that had been addressed to the central government were redirected to relevant ministries, who in return sent them back to regional administrations because local matters were their responsibility. However, since regional and district administrations already had established relationships with the company, activists viewed their position as biased. Consider the following example, which activists used to exemplify the ‘vicious circle’ that involved the central government, regional administration and the mining company:

During the events of 6 April 2010, many state buildings in Talas city were damaged including the buildings of the regional administration and regional police department. After the revolutionary government came to power, the new regional administration received an order to restore the buildings and re-establish their proper functioning. But where would a poor administration find the money to do so? The answer was] simple. Regional authorities do what they usually do in cases when they need cash – they turn to private ‘sponsors’. In Talas, there are not many large businesses. The obvious ones are mining companies. The governor and *akims* resorted to approaching Talas Copper Gold, among other miners that operate in Talas. The company gave them money but this rendered the regional authorities dependent on the company. So when ordinary people like us put pressure on the company, the company pressures the regional authorities who revert the pressure back onto us. Regional authorities therefore become trapped and in return, trap us, too. It’s a vicious circle.³⁰¹

Indeed, I found a document among other files in the activist’s archives titled ‘The program of social assistance in 2010’, which detailed the company’s spending for that year. Although the document has the company’s executive signature on it, I cannot claim with certainty its authenticity. However, interestingly, the document shows the granting of 60 000 som to the Talas district administration and 20 000 som to the Talas regional police department under the title ‘Assistance to April event victims’.³⁰² In neighbouring Kazakhstan, Edward Conway found similar informal payments made by mining firms to *akims* and other local permitting and regulatory officials, but these payments were related rather to the patron-client

³⁰¹ Interview with Sabyr Mamytov, Bishkek, May 2015.

³⁰² ‘Vypolnennaia programma socialnoi podderjki 2010 goda, ispolnitelny director OcOO Talas Copper Gold, V. Morozov’ [The executed program of social assistance 2010, Talas Copper Gold executive director V. Morozov].

system³⁰³ instead of indicating the chronic dependence of state institutions on investors observed in Kyrgyzstan.

One has to carefully consider actors' perceptions and allegations where the state is concerned. From the above statements it is clear that the state became a site of political fantasies and intense emotions,³⁰⁴ such as the evidenced disappointment and confusion in our case; furthermore, individuals experienced the subjective effect of state power on their locality and their collective endeavours. On the one hand, based on the correspondence that took place between the activists and state institutions between 2010 and 2011, one cannot say that the state acted 'unresponsive' to their complaints. In fact, the state arguably 'acted' in its usual manner, i.e., differentiating and delegating societal issues to specific agencies.³⁰⁵ However, rapidity matters when issues feel

³⁰³ Conway, E. (2014) 'Mining junior, major political risks. Bridging structural challenges in the mining sector in Kazakhstan', *Central Asian Affairs*, vol.1, no. 1, pp. 24-47.

³⁰⁴ Navaro-Yashin, Y. (2002) *Faces of the State: Secularism and Public Life in Turkey*, Princeton: Princeton University Press; Spencer, J. (2007) *Anthropology, Politics and the State: Democracy and Violence in South Asia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

³⁰⁵ Until 2013, the Kyrgyz state preferred to turn a blind eye to anti-mining resistance, instead waiting for communities to eventually change their minds. Recently, however, government has slowly begun to shape mining policy. It reorganized the Ministry of Natural Resources and reshuffled other relative bodies: the Ministry of Economic Development, the State Agency of Geology and the State Agency of Technical Security. Mining policy, as such, had not existed until 2011 and the state's role had mainly been confined to the allocation and annulation of licenses. The new policy was conceived on the basis of the newly formed Department of Mineral Resources at the Ministry of Economic Development. The creation of the Department of Mineral Resources increased formal avenues for the protesting community in which to address and follow up their claims. The department became a point of reference for residents. The structure of command of the State Department of Mineral Resources follows a reverse pyramid shape, likely typical for resource-poor states. The department officer resides in Bishkek and heads a team of only 10 people. Lack of resources does not allow him to open regional offices and the understaffing of regional administrations also impedes a direct transfer of functions. The government is currently considering transferring some of the department's central functions to local governments. For the moment, however, the department has to fashion and implement policy in a top-down manner. To be fair, the government had been proactive in resourcing well-suited individuals for the department from the small business community based in Bishkek, as well as attracting independent experts. Most importantly, the government recently integrated local activists to special state commissions that had been designed to organize open auctions for gold licenses. Such a centralized mining policy has led to the concentration of decision-making within the capital. To compensate for the state's 'non-visibility' in the province and to appease local concerns, the team undertakes trips in order to disseminate information about the state's activities, to follow up with 'local developments' and to a lesser degree, resolve conflicts. Although department officers travel to contentious communities, these trips do not come across as routines that offer help in effectuating the state's control over geographical space. These non-regular

pressing to citizens and therefore their perceptions of state responsiveness are important. Moreover, it seems like the outcomes of differentiation and delegation, in their current format, do not make the central state look good as a mediator of social conflicts on the ground.³⁰⁶ On the other hand, actors' perceptions can tell us something about the context of dependence of state institutions as it creates distinct institutional conditions for grassroots mobilizations in the Kyrgyzstani periphery. Dependence on foreign investors is clearly seen as a sign of state weakness and has implications for groups that contest central policies. For example, in one of the letters addressed to the then head of Interim Government, Rosa Otunbaeva, Sabyr Mamytov wrote,

One more thing to add to our argument, when you came as the head of parliamentary delegation to the neighbouring Kopuro-Bazar village to attend the opening of a gold factory you might remember that the local population did not want to give its consent to the factory. But the company quickly resorted to a blackmail – if the factory were not open the village would have to return the 3.5 MLN som of social assistance invested by the company. You then reproached that the Kopuro-Bazar residents should not have taken the money and because of that there was no way back. We, the Aral people, remember your words very well.³⁰⁷

Learning lessons from other mining sites, Aral activists thus decided to circumvent a plausible blackmailing both from the mining company and the central government. In the interviews with activists I was told that it was the reason why their demands to the company were formulated as 'compensation' for harm and not 'social assistance'. Returning to the dependence of central and regional authorities on foreign firms, this creates a situation where protest groups acquire, in addition to its primary opponent (the mining company) another opponent – a 'weak state' – that cannot efficiently regulate conflicts on the ground. This obviously puts forth certain obstacles for grassroots mobilizations,

'drops' involving officials were of a primarily apologetic character and did not resemble 'normal' state activities such as inspections, instructions and disciplining. From the difficulties that this department and two other state agencies (Agency of Geology and Agency for Technical Security) encountered in terms of transgressing these localities and imposing state regulation, I was able to observe the state's limited ability for encompassing its territory.

³⁰⁶ Elsewhere, Doolotkeldieva and Heathershaw showed that both local social groups and companies continue to resort to the state despite its deficient performance as mediator. See Asel Doolot, A. and Heathershaw, J. (2015).

³⁰⁷ Letter to the Head of the Interim Government, Rosa Otunbaeva, 10 May 2010, [Aral].

because in the absence of an institutional framework, local actors have to effect significant local organizational power in order to sustain resistance. This point will be further discussed in the final part of the chapter. To conclude this section, engaging regional and state institutions as a mediator of controversies turned out inefficient for Aral activists. This is why parallel to institutional channels they also engaged the wider circles of fellow residents to form a stronger leverage on the company and the state.

2.2. Village public gatherings: grievances, risks perceptions and attempts to mobilize residents

In this part of the chapter I will explore another mechanism of addressing mining issues, which became prominent in this case. I will relate to ways in which environmental concerns were brought to the attention of Aral residents and how these were translated into a partial collective action – public gatherings. I am interested here in exploring how public discussions and deliberation affected the path of mobilization.

On 9 April 2010, a large crowd marched on the camp with slogans reading '*Kompania ketsin!*' – a statement imploring the removal of the company from the area. This march has transformed into a first large village gathering, *eldik jyin*. Gatherings were employed as a means for pulling residents together, to promote injustice frameworks, propagate nationalist discourses and advance anti-mining claims. In the initial stage of mobilization, village gatherings became an efficient means of communication among residents on the one hand and between themselves and their opponent, the mining firm, on the other. At first, these gatherings were attended by large amounts of people including representatives from local institutions, ordinary residents and specifically, members of Chokoi *uruu*. However, the volume of attendance has gradually decreased to involve, during the final gatherings, members of Chokoi *uruu* only. Below, I will describe chronologically the unfolding of gatherings and analyse their capacity for the construction of resistance.

There were overall five large public meetings that were called during the period from April 2010 to March 2011, the time of the first violent attack on the mining company. Although public deliberation and decision-making on important matters and events such as *kurultays*³⁰⁸ happen occasionally at local and regional levels, 'public space' has nonetheless been weakly developed in rural areas. For example, local councils rarely practice open discussion of matters regarding socio-economic and political life. Their deliberation on issues such as the approval of local budgets and the allocation of land takes place within a closed format. In this sense, the sudden possibility of discussing mining activities in public was unprecedented. Thus village gatherings served as an important vehicle to air and disseminate a range of grievances and concerns. Consider the following concise opinion by one of the residents concerning the role of gatherings for learning about mining operations:

Prior to the revolution we had no idea what harm the company was doing to our lands, our pastures, waters and nature. Everything was covert! Then our eyes were opened, we learned things, we began searching out information. And we began putting forward our demands!³⁰⁹

Many were inclined to trust information about environmental risks provided by the activists and supported the anti-company cause, at least verbally. The following quote by a local farmer exemplifies the role of risk perceptions in forming resentment against mining operations:

At this explorative phase, ecological damage is not comprehensible to us. But we have no idea how the company will behave in the future. If the state was strong and laws were enforced, it could give us some guarantee that the company will re-cultivate excavated lands. It would give us some guarantee that in case of ecological violations, we would be compensated.

³⁰⁸ *Kurultay* is a historic Turkic tradition of popular assemblies. Some politicians and public activists have even sought to incorporate it in the constitution as a tool for popular deliberation and decision-making. On the implication of *kurultay* in the Kyrgyzstani revolutions, see Madeleine Reeves and Kathleen Collins. Reeves, M. (2014d) 'We're with the people!' Place, nation, and political community in Kyrgyzstan's 2010 'April events', *The Anthropology of East Europe Review*, vol. 32, no. 2, fall, pp. 68-88; Collins, K. (2011) 'Kyrgyzstan's latest revolution', *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 22, no. 3, July, pp. 150-164.

³⁰⁹ Interview with a participant of gatherings #2, Aral, November 2014.

But we have to deal with Kumtor as an example regarding environmental violations! There is no certitude, so we prefer not to risk our lands.³¹⁰

Next to environmental concerns, village gatherings have also revealed a reservoir of grievances related to the company's previous elitist approach. Prior to the April Revolution, led by the company Director Morozov, management was believed to have had a good relationship with the Bakievs' crony regime. Morozov's allegedly friendly relations with the district, provincial and central authorities, as well as the secret services served as proof of this suggestion. In addition, according to local narratives, Morozov chose to cooperate only with the village elite and neglected other social groups. Additionally, the Talas Copper Gold's style of management did not differ much from the '*vertikal vlasti*' ('the vertical of power') or the methods used by the central regime to stay in power, i.e., intimidation and repression.³¹¹ The company's co-optation of village elites thus became one of the recurring topics that helped to foster a nationalist anti-elite discourse.

The first village gathering on 9 April, 2010, hosted approximately 500 people.³¹² Galvanized by anti-elitist and environmental discourses, participants demanded a complete withdrawal of the company from the Taldy Bulak mine. The Talas district *akim* signed a protocol stating that the removal of the company from the area did not contradict the people's will. The company's representatives signed the resolution and promised to move out within a week period. This was an unprecedented example of the success achieved by organizers of resistance, who were able to mount resistance that received approval from local officials and even the mining company. This gathering became a crucial moment of mobilization: it set a clear agenda for resistance and because of the attendance of local and district authorities, gained official status. In follow-up gatherings and

³¹⁰ Author interview with a participant #3, Aral, August 2012.

³¹¹ To be specific, the company was not alone in this position; many other investors have been caught by surprise by the post-revolutionary social insurgency. Having no reason for working with local communities, investors simply ignored how local political and social relations functioned and were affected by their operations. Interview with mining companies, Bishkek, 2013.

³¹² Author interview with Sabyr Mamyrov, May 2015, Bishkek.

official letters, organizers of resistance would refer to this resolution as a decision made by all the people (*jalpy eldik jyiyn*). The gathering also led to the formation of a temporary commission for ‘removing the company’. Consisting of 12 individuals elected from village *kvartals*, the commission’s job was to closely observe implementation of the 9 April resolution conceived at the first gathering.

Resistance participants took the resolution very seriously. Thus, a week later on 16 April, residents gathered again to check on the company’s progress for implementing the people’s will. Together with the head of *ayil okmot* and company representatives they carried out inspection of the mining camp and its remaining equipment.³¹³ They recorded the speed of the company’s compliance with demands and because it was unsatisfying, the next residents’ meeting was scheduled for a week later, on 22 April. Roughly 310 people took part in the meeting. Besides checking on the company’s progress, the gathering had the objective of activating local institutions including women, elders and youth councils to the anti-mining cause. Their alliance was sought in order to provide more legitimacy to the resolutions passed at gatherings. The meeting was also marked by new advancements in the activists’ work against the mining company. Thus, activists collected information about international regulations that govern disputes between foreign companies and national states. They made reference to international conventions on environmental protection and expressed concerns related to risks of the Kyrgyz state losing the case if Talas Copper Gold decided to appeal in an arbitration court. This developed the new understanding that the anti-mining resistance was no longer a local matter, but a case that extended beyond national jurisdiction. This awareness regarding international regulations was surprising, given the poor penetration of Internet access and other sources of information in the rural area.³¹⁴

³¹³ Protocol of meeting, 16 April 2010, [Arai].

³¹⁴ According to a study conducted by UNESCO in 2012, less than one subscriber per 100 subscribers had access to fixed broadband Internet and only four out of 100 inhabitants subscribed to mobile broadband access in Kyrgyzstan. See UNESCO, (2012) The State of Broadband 2012: Achieving digital inclusion for all [Online], Available at: <http://www.broadbandcommission.org/documents/bb-annualreport2012.pdf> [20 August 2015].

The next village gathering occurred a month later, on 29 May. Roughly 90 people took part in the meeting. Unlike previous meetings that had the objective of observing the company's compliance with the resolution, this time, participants addressed internal issues. Most importantly, participants noted the dissatisfying level of participation among local institutions in the meetings. They noted the 'unacceptable passivity' on the part of these institutions and urged them to comply with the 'people's will' and not create 'divisions'. After hearing numerous complaints about the inactivity of these representatives, participants created a resolution that included the following sanctions on said institutions:

1. 'The *aksakal sotu* (elders' council) should side with either the people or free their seats.'
2. 'The *ayil okmot* (village administration) should interact with local people independently from the district and regional administrations.'³¹⁵
3. 'Those who spoil the unity of the people and oppose the people's demands should be held responsible for doing so and bear the subsequent consequences.'³¹⁶

This gathering displayed the first signs of emerging problems within mobilization. Participants highlighted how the continuous commitment of local institutions to the cause was important for the integrity of mobilization and the legitimacy of resistance. Sanctions taken against these institutions demonstrated the importance of their commitment on the one hand and underscored the policing efforts within mobilization on the other. This meant that organizers of resistance attempted to undertake steps to stop defection in order to maintain the legitimacy of gatherings. These measures, however, were not efficient for mitigating the decreasing number of participants when by autumn 2010, the heads of *ayil okmot* and *kenesh* withdrew from mobilization, despite their initial alliance. This illustrates once again that village populations do not represent homogenous

³¹⁵ The anti-mining activists considered that the district and regional administration were complacent with the company and had worked against people.

³¹⁶ On the emergence of local institutions of self-governance following the disintegration of *kolkhozes*, see an analysis by Pétric, B., Jacquesson, S., Gossiaux J-F. and Bourgeot A. (2004) 'L'émergence de nouveaux pouvoirs locaux sur les cendres d'un kolkhoze kirghize (oblast de Naryn)', *Cahiers d'Asie Centrale*, vol. 13, no. 14, pp. 21-44.

'communities' steered by authority institutions and that defection is an important issue for grassroots mobilizations.

The defection of participants explains why the next gathering became even more 'specialized' in the way that it convened only the farmers of the Taldy Bulak area and primarily those from Chokoi *uruu*. The meeting took place on 24 October and brought together 177 farmers, who represented both farmers and their entire families. The goal of the meeting was to organize a 'public discussion' (*talkuu jurguzuu*) and to 'express grievances against the company's recent activities' (*naarazychylyk korsotuu*). The floor was given to farmers to air their grievances about the alleged harm caused by the company's activities. The protocol of the meeting shortly stated these grievances as follows:

[Farmer, Eraliev Abdykan]: My three sheep have recently died.

[Farmer, no name]: This year, my wheat and potato harvests decreased.

[Farmer, no name]: Because of explosive activities, my house and the barn developed cracks and became unusable.³¹⁷

Two things are noticeable regarding this gathering. First, it shows a decreased number of participants and an absence of representatives from local institutions and ordinary citizens (I will explain their withdrawal in the second part of this chapter). Second, another novelty of this meeting was that participants began recording 'concrete' grievances in contrast to the initial framing of resistance, which consisted of vague 'ecological' claims. It has to be noted that these claims could only have been vague, since the gold-mining project had at the time only been in the research, not production phase.³¹⁸ At this stage of public gatherings, resistance organizers began requesting compensation for the alleged damage caused to land and lost harvest. Interestingly, compensation specifically concerned those farmers of Chokoi *uruu* whose lands were being subjected to mining operations. Other *uruus* contested that only Chokoi *uruu* benefited from

³¹⁷ Protocol of meeting, 24 October 2010, [Aral].

³¹⁸ At this phase of the gold-mining project, grievances concerning mining operations were fears about future risks that neither mining companies nor the state took seriously, because fears do not point to the existence of 'concrete' harm and violations. At this stage, such societal grievances are easily discarded and the inability to demonstrate harm may undermine movement claims.

compensations; the dispute among *uruus* over the ways the compensation should be formulated contributed to the alienation of many residents from the resistance movement.³¹⁹ Although other residents later questioned the credibility of claims about harm, the initiators of resistance used records of these public gatherings as evidence for everyone's grievances in their communications with the mining company and central authorities.

To summarize this section, I view these public gatherings as fulfilling a number of important functions. First, they were an important initial step for raising awareness about mining among residents, which had been silenced during the authoritarian era (or diagnostic framework, to use Snow et al.'s (1986) typology of frame alignment). It was during these meetings that organizers framed the anti-mining resistance in environmental and nationalist terms. Second, the meetings were also a first step in the organization of collective action on the part of a village segment (prognostic frame³²⁰). Third, with the help of meeting protocols, the evolution of organizers' efforts for constructing resistance could be tracked, beginning with convincing local officials to their side, activating local institutions and finally, narrowing collective action down to a specific group of farmers. Thus, each gathering revealed new internal problems, which leads me to appreciate fragility and vulnerability of grassroots movements. This provides significant insights into the problems that protest groups face.

I showed through these instances of mobilization how attempts to build an anti-mining resistance came into being and lasted for almost a year prior to the escalation of conflict. Such an extent of contestation is surprising in the context of weak social organizations and power institutions on the ground. By weak local infrastructure, I do not refer to existing rituals, traditions and informal mechanisms of support that exist in rural Kyrgyzstan, and that may govern local

³¹⁹ Competition between factions over compensation is also found in other parts of the world. For example for similar developments in Papua New Guinea see, Imbun, B. Y. (2000) 'Mining workers or 'opportunistic' tribesmen?: A tribal workforce in a Papua New Guinea mine', *Oceania*, vol. 71, no. 2, December, pp. 129-149.

³²⁰ Snow, D., Rochford, E., Steven, Jr., Worden, K. and Benford, R. (1986).

economy, ethics, social norms and politics. As Zemfira Inogamova (2015: 195) demonstrates, these traditions and rituals serve as 'resilience techniques' and in my understanding, are ill equipped to guide individuals through challenges of contemporary economy and politics. Instead we witnessed the emergence of provisional public space open for discussions of an important question. The creation of public gatherings is a positive surprise taking, into account that only a few months earlier, public space had been completely restricted. Passed in 2009, the Bakievs' 'reform strengthened central supervision over the provinces and guaranteed Bishkek a say in local affairs. With public opinion self-restricted and media [being] harassed by state authorities, no debate existed.'³²¹ That initiators of resistance prioritized public and formal channels of communication before turning to violent means.

III. Informal Politics Versus Open Politics

Now I would like to address the main puzzle of this case; why, despite the initial success of mobilizing residents and the construction of collective grievances, the anti-mining activists did not manage to oust the company as in the neighboring Kopuro-Bazar where a strong resistance led to the closure of Andash mining. My earlier account of the consequences of violent attacks might strongly suggest that the escalation of violence and the arrest of young residents were the direct causes of demobilization. My contention, however, is that demobilization occurred prior to the escalation and that the violent turn can actually be understood as the consequence of a growing despair among remaining activists about the impossibility to achieve their goals by peaceful means. By the time of violent attacks the number of participants in anti-mining gatherings has declined from 500 to 90 (the last figure being probably conflated because of the inclusion of all family members). Furthermore, I link demobilization to the dynamics of open politics that has emerged out of public discussions and deliberations. The role of public discussions should not be underestimated; they create new dynamics that put the anti-mining activists and their cause under a larger and closer scrutiny

³²¹ Wolters, A. (2013), p. 232.

and they set up conditions for the formation of opinions which cannot be achieved to the same degree under informal politics. The inclusion of open politics and all the accompanying complexities (such as rumours) as a new variable offers a much more nuanced understanding of conflict, that is usually fixated on the stakeholders' analysis. In this part of the chapter, I will discuss how the emerging public scrutiny revealed an ambivalent agenda pursued among some anti-mining activists.

3.1. Ambivalent agenda: a struggle for power or environment?

What came unexpected against the background of proclaimed environmental and nationalist discourses were rumours discrediting the anti-mining activists intentions. It turned out that vested private interests linked the major organizers of resistance to the company. Prior to the revolution Talas Copper Gold employed Sabyr Mamytov in the position of an important community liaison officer. He was retrenched in late 2009 and became an *opposicioner* (opposition to the company) exactly at this moment. This external opinion would contradict Sabyr Mamytov's own account, according to which his opposition against the miner began as early as 2007 and had nothing to do with his employment but was linked to the crony regime covering up the company. Yet as the Talas Copper Gold's employee has told me in the interview, it was a mistake to let him go as he turned out to be influential in the village.³²² Other residents grew to share the same opinion as they learned that while Sabyr Mamytov had been propagating anti-mining claims, he had allegedly written letters to the company requesting he be re-instituted to his previous position. So they viewed his shift to opposition as false, not a genuine response.

Similar parochial stories linked other anti-mining activists to the company. Thus rumours were circulating that the then director of a school and her husband, the former head of *ayil kenesh*, became harsh critics of the mining company when they failed to sublet their property to the company, which had been looking to

³²² Interview with a Talas Copper Gold's employee, Bishkek, 2013.

establish a local office in the village. Another small entrepreneur allegedly joined this group when he failed to conclude an agreement with the company concerning food supplies. Still another member of the group, the current head of *ayil okmot*, held allegedly grievances against the company in relation to his failed election to the local office. He perceived the company as supporting an opposing candidate in the run up to elections. Strong rumours suggested that he organized a dozen of young residents to set a second attack on the camp in October 2011 as a revenge for his lost office.

Whether these rumours are false or true (and I am interested not in the validity of their content but rather in how they work in the creation of positive or negative opinions about mining), Sabyr Mamytov and other anti-mining activists' struggle for economic and political resources can be better understood by placing this struggle into a local political perspective. This group hoped to come to power after many years of being in opposition to the regime and local power-holders. The revolution of April 2010 gave such an unprecedented opportunity but it was taken away by a competing group belonging to another opposition party Ata-Meken that has also participated in Talas uprisings and contributed to the demise of regime. Following the revolution, Ata-Meken affiliated residents Dokturbek Dosmanbet Uulu and Medet Turat were elected to head respectively *ayil okmot* and *ayil kenesh*.

Notwithstanding the popular support shown to these residents, Sabyr Mamytov's group made several attempts to unseat the newly elected leaders, which included renewed complaints to the regional administration and central institutions and local attempts to sabotage their work. For example, in one of their letters to the National Agency for Local Self-Governance, a member of group and the then acting deputy Islam Israilov criticized the passivity of the heads of *ayil okmot* and *ayil kenesh* as the primary cause of the violent turn on the miner.³²³ The struggle for power within local institutions is important to our understanding of how some

³²³ Letter to the National Agency for the Local Self-Governance from 9 September 2011.

residents grew to view the mining project as closely associated with power dynamics. Sabyr Mamytov described his confrontation with incumbent politicians as a struggle against the desire of the Ata-Meken party to get hold of gold resources in Aral and Talas Province in general. In return, the elected head of *ayil okmot*, Dokturbek Dosmanbet Uulu, described Sabyr Mamytov's resistance against the mining in similar terms:

This group gained an interest in the company by observing how the then village seniors were receiving gifts and other benefits from the company management. They wanted to be part of this game (*oyun*) and since the company was used to dealing with village seniors only, they sought to take control of the local power institutions. They tried many means. They participated in elections, put forward their candidates and tried even to corrupt elections, but to no avail. Finally, they organized informal discussion bureaus at their homes and mobilized relatives and the wider Chokoi *uruu* to their side as a means to gain larger weight in the village.³²⁴

This insight into local power dynamics adds a new dimension to the environmental claims that was not obvious in the beginning. In the context of impoverished rural countryside and corrupt governance, the company's activities came to be viewed as closely connected to an individual access to resources and power. We can see how the company's previous (whether real or imagined) activities, i.e., the co-optation of village seniors, gave rise to jealousies among competing faction.³²⁵ For individuals, these activities showed that one's access to gold resources even at this study phase could be enhanced if one could achieve an official power position in the village. It can therefore be said that the desire to change the existing *status quo* between the company and village seniors was not a 'spontaneous' response to April Revolution but part of the authoritarian legacy.

This extremely complex matrix of economic and power interests, which is only partially covered here, problematizes the objectives of the anti-mining

³²⁴ Interview with the former Head of Village Administration, Dokturbek Dosmanbet uluu, Talas, July 2015.

³²⁵ My material does not allow discussing in detail the company's policies but the appearance of a new large economic actor certainly created new tensions and dynamics within the structure of local relationships. In many instances interviews described the miner as a source of social disaccord.

organization. Was it meant to evict Talas Copper Gold so that the local lifestyle could never be compromised again, like in the neighbouring village Kopuro-Bazar, or was it conceived in order to co-opt the company through blackmailing and threats? This question did not arise only in my mind but also in minds of my interviewees. The pursuit of power by anti-mining activists raised suspicions about the authenticity of their previous environmental concerns and nationalist discourses. In a world of discredited politics and generalized distrust, the discrepancy between 'real' intentions and public claims creates problems for the formation and sustainability of protest groups. In the next part of the chapter I will show the consequences of the exposure of the activists' ambivalent agenda on the path of mobilization.

IV. Declining Mobilization

The above analysis helped to prepare the basis for a discussion of the primary research question of this empirical chapter: **why mobilization declined despite the initial success?** It answers my general question investigated in the thesis: **under which conditions can local episodes of mobilization be transformed into lasting mobilization?** This question becomes particularly intriguing against the background of growing conflict between publicly shared claims and the informal agenda for which this claim was activated. Taken separately, the two elements of the context, environmental concerns and competition for resources, do not fully explain the development of mobilization, although they are helpful in terms of accounting for the incidents that triggered it. I argue that a growing awareness among residents of the discrepancies between the two changes the dynamics of mobilization.

Since environmental claims already began fading during public gatherings, it may be helpful to return to these episodes of mobilization. Here, I ask in particular what happens when participants of initial mobilization become aware that the initiators of resistance do not represent collective interests, as claimed, but instead seek out private benefits? How does a local audience become aware of

and have the opportunity to form opinions about the dual positions of anti-mining activists? What happens when the divergence between public environmental claims and mundane motivations (petty struggles for power and the distribution of resources) become known within the wider local arena? In this part of the chapter I will discuss the real implications of the exposure of the activists' ambivalent agenda for the trajectory of mobilization.

To answer these questions, I return to my conceptualization of the production of trust as a condition *sine qua non* for the formation of a structured mobilization, as outlined in Chapter III. I have stressed that in the context of precarious Kyrgyzstani conditions, the construction of grassroots mobilizations can only be successful if initiators prove their commitment to collective interests and if to-be-participants put their trust in initiators, and follow their proposed ideas. Acquisition and maintenance of trust are even more current in contexts where informal politics meets with open politics.

The establishment of trust takes place through repeated interactions between initiators and interested individuals. These interactions have to be sustained because trust is not formed at only one stage and individuals need to be reassured of initiators' authenticity on a continuous basis. Discredited politics have created a significant legacy of generalized distrust, which can only be overcome through repeated actions. I termed this exercise a *monitoring* process, by which interested individuals observe initiators and other participants and can in this way form opinions about whether to follow the resistance or not.

The production of trust is a circular dynamic, since it involves the attempts of initiators to breach suspicion on the one hand and individuals observing these actions on the other. The monitoring process can therefore produce both negative and beneficial outcomes: it can either lead to the creation of trust or even more suspicion, as well as the further alienation of individuals. I find this constructivist approach as a useful concept for analysing an otherwise weakly-

structured resistance movement. In the context of local mobilizations in Aral, such interactions had been present during public gatherings and during meetings of the 'Aral commission'. In the following, I focus on these sites of (non-) construction of trust and discuss their implications on the dynamics of mobilization, as well as on the wider notions of politics within the village.

4.1. Monitoring of behaviour of initiators of resistance via village gatherings and the non-construction of resistance

During the early stages of contention public gatherings served as crucial provisional open spaces in which residents received alternative interpretations about mining operations that those offered by the state and the mining company. As already demonstrated above, these public spaces turned into sites of intense meaning-making regarding on-going events, as well as the future risks that such events entailed for local economies and traditional lifestyles. Thus, gatherings were conducive to the creation and proliferation of environmental concerns and nationalist discourses.



Figure 7: A village gathering including members of the Village Administration, Village Council, residents and representatives of Talas Copper Gold
(© Asel Doolotkeldieva)

However, public gatherings turned out to have a different function than what the organizers had planned. Initially conceived as a platform where initiators of resistance could take a leading role by actively convincing residents to join the movement, these gatherings instead developed into a space where initiators' own actions were subjected to scrutiny and criticism. The gatherings offered a perfect setting for making observations about this novel collective enterprise and its organizers. Additionally, participants of the meetings became active observers and not simply the recipients of the organizers' strategies. In one meeting after another, residents were able to monitor the behaviour of initiators and made a number of important conclusions that helped them to make decisions about their individual participation in the anti-mining resistance. For example, respondents became aware that the initiators of resistance too often changed their positions. One resident recalls:

At the beginning, I tried to attend all the meetings, because I am an ecologist by training and I believe our environment deserves attention from the state and from all citizens. I was, however, disappointed. The so-called activists are activists only by name. For example, they accused the mining company for not performing land reclamation and called for general mobilization. Then at the next meeting, they announced that they had received millions of soms from the company to work on reclamation. At the meeting after that, when asked what they had done with the money they could not provide clear answers. These movements were so confusing. I concluded that the activists did not know what they were talking about. I told to my family not to go to their meetings anymore because it was a waste of time.³²⁶

Participants of gatherings accused the initiators of making contradictory statements within a short period of time, which was a strong indication of inconsistency to their opposition to the mining company. These inconsistencies were further exposed when rumours spread that activists had allegedly been employed at the camp, given financial compensation, or had established private business contracts with the company. Such rumours gave rise to suspicions about whether the initiators of resistance represented collective or personal interests. As one participant of a village gathering noted:

³²⁶ Interview with a participant of gatherings #4, Aral, October 2014.

This Ortok, he was the main *oposicioner* to the company. Yet, after he criticized the company he was hired, together with his association, to work on land reclamation. I do not remember exactly - he received two or three million som for this project. We did not understand this move: had his previous criticism been orchestrated to attain the contract? Had his opposition been fake (*jasalma*)?³²⁷

The seeming inconsistencies of the activists' positions introduced even further suspicion and distrust among other residents and soon, the public gatherings turned into intense practices of mutual criticism and policing of each other. One resident remembers the following debate during a gathering:

There was one farmer who claimed that his sheep had died because of geological operations near his pastures. But another farmer, the first farmer's relative, exposed him as lying during the next gathering. He said 'how can your cattle die if mine are in perfect shape and my pastures are located even closer to the camp than yours?' Later, the company hired the first complaining farmer as an expeditor. Everything became clear to us: complaints about the dead sheep had been made up to help the farmer squeeze benefits from the company (*kompaniadan ondurup alysh kerek*).³²⁸

Gatherings ended up unravelling petty power struggles and the opportunism of fellow residents, and undermined many previous social relationships in the village. This is reminiscent of what Hirsch (1990) wrote about such consciousness-raising exercises, which can 'get out of hand' since they necessarily involve the challenge of existing relationships. From sites of collective diagnosis and frame-making, gatherings turned into instances of mutual criticism and laying blame. The process of the construction of resistance was interrupted, because individuals who had initially been interested in the topic and attended the meetings discovered inconsistencies in the behaviour of resistance initiators. These inconsistencies led them to question the authenticity of the supposed leaders, leading to the negation of trust in the cause. Specifically, gatherings brought to light the fact that activists who had previously mobilized residents to oust the mining company were in fact involved in co-optation deals with the company. The number of meeting attendants rapidly declined as a result; at the

³²⁷ Interview with a participant of gatherings #5, Aral, October 2014.

³²⁸ Interview with a participant of gatherings #6, Aral, October 2014.

fourth meeting, only 90 people attended, which was less than one fifth of the initial attendees. One may be surprised at the speed that such observations and deductions took place; however, in the context of generalized distrust, even a few instances are enough to formalize negative conclusions.

This example shows how a promising technique for creating mutual understanding and collective action was transformed into fragmentation. To highlight this contrast, we saw in the previous chapter how group gatherings formed the basis for collective action among workers. In Aral, too, group gatherings had the potential to form strong resistance had initiators of resistance been authentic and therefore more likely to be successful in breaching through public suspicions. Most importantly, the exposure of activists' opportunism led to the discrediting of environmental claims previously defended by activists. Against this background of informal deals, corruption and competition for power, no one will easily believe in the authenticity of environmental organization. Sabyr Mamytov had been aware of these perceptions surrounding his political activism and referred to their propagation as the *jaman attuu kyluu* ('ruining one's reputation'), a process that can in this instance be understood as a kind of local 'discrediting machine'. Not only was he aware of this discrediting process, he also tried to function within the context of distrust. After seeing how the exposure works in small social settings, I would like to address now some of its consequences on the 'community' and local politics.

V. Ambivalent Outcomes of Mobilization: Amorphous 'Community', Political Space and Public Opinion

In this part of the chapter, I will consider the impact of the exposure of the activists' ambivalent agenda and further proliferation of confusion and distrust among people involved in gatherings. In the first place, I will show the inability of residents to act as a community, i.e. a group of people that are able to make collectively binding decisions. Secondly, I will demonstrate how a growing distrust among ordinary residents and even members of resistance led to the failure to

sustain the organization of resistance. Thirdly, I will illustrate how the failure to sustain resistance on the basis of trust led to discrediting of politics altogether.

5.1. Aral commission: further fragmentation of collective interests?

The failure to form trust concerning the environmental cause and the further intensification of suspicions about the ‘real’ intentions of the anti-mining activists have produced lasting impacts on the local capacity to oversee mining operations. After signing of the cooperation agreement between village authorities and the company in December 2011, it was decided that mining operations would be delegated to a new body, independent from the *ayil kenesh* and *ayil okmot*. According to the former Head of *ayil okmot*, this decision was made specifically to provide new impetus for mining, because residents did not trust existing institutions and their capacity to oversee the company’s activities.³²⁹ As a result, this specialized village commission was formed with the mining company’s assistance in order to create another space for open deliberation and decision-making on matters pertaining to mining. The delegated matters included various issues ranging from control for equal employment policy and supervision of the ‘social fund’,³³⁰ to the allocation of social projects aimed at local development. The commission consisted of 12 members – three members per *kvartal* from each village section.

Initially designed to represent the interests of all lines of descent to secure unanimity and the legitimacy of the commission’s decisions, the commission quickly turned into yet another battlefield over private interests. Residents accused members of the commission of corruption and lobbying their relatives to various positions within the company. As for the members, they rarely agreed among themselves regarding the spending of social funds and their meetings

³²⁹ Interview with the former Head of Village Administration, Dokturbek Dosmanbet Uluu, Talas, July 2015.

³³⁰ Talas Copper Gold allocates \$20,000 per district per annum (‘Base Fund’) and contributes additional funds depending on the number of metres drilled in that area (the amount contributed is calculated on a sliding scale from USD20 to USD5 per metre drilled) that is the ‘Additional Funds’.

were often marked by verbal aggression, mutual criticism and suspicion. In addition, after anti-mining activists had to demobilize they shifted their activities to intervening in the work of the commission. As a member of commission noted:

The village lost control of these activists because they [had] a strong character and nobody could control them. I'll give you an example: they get themselves elected to the commission from their village *kvartals* or if they fail to do so, they create intrigues within the commission to compromise other members and then capture their seats. They are able to mobilize '*dejurny baldar*' (boys on duty) in every *kvartal* to seed agitation among the residents. They criticize the mining company, but at the same time seek to be part of its core activities in the village. They create unnecessary havoc (*yzychuu*) and in this way alienate other residents who don't want to get involved in activities pertaining to mining.³³¹

Members often quit the commission due to a growing disbelief in the success of this collective effort. Talas Copper Gold may disagree with my analysis because the company succeeded, despite these internal problems within the commission, to carry out a number of significant social projects in the village. These include the allocation of stipends for village students, the purchase of repair parts for agricultural combiners, the organization of garbage utilization, establishment of a TV station and others.³³² However, as some employees of the company admitted, due to the weakness of local power institutions and the Aral commission, the community was unable to take full advantage of these projects. Weakness of institutions was closely linked to the perceived opportunism and incompetence of local leaders.³³³

One example concerning a kindergarten project can illustrate my point that the Aral commission is a manifestation of inability of residents to act collectively in regard to mining issues. Since money accumulated in the social fund was scarce, it was possible to implement only a limited number of projects. Proposed projects included the construction of a kindergarten, a hospital unit, the purchasing of farming combiners, roads repairs and the creation of small workshops. Naturally,

³³¹ Interview with a member of Aral commission, Aral, May 2015.

³³² I do not discuss in length here the company's activities aimed at fulfilling its 'social license' obligations.

³³³ Interview with a former employee of Talas Copper Gold, Bishkek, May 2015.

each project mirrored the interests of distinct groups. A kindergarten, for example, reflected female voices united under the women's council (*ayaldar keneshy*). The purchase of combiners corresponded to the needs of farmers and the repair of roads echoed the needs of the middle and rich classes who owned cars. Jonathon Hornbrook, Head of the Mineral Resources for Development Program at the German organization for sustainable development GIZ, rightfully noted, an average Kyrgyz who travels by horse will not need paved roads in the village.³³⁴

At one of the commission's meetings, residents planned to discuss the possibility for opening a kindergarten using social fund money. Several women conducted a survey during a period of three months and were about to present the results at one of the commission's public hearings; however, anti-mining activists outnumbered them and halted their presentation. Taking advantage of the fact that ordinary residents did not attend such meetings in large numbers, activists managed to simply suppress female voices. A female respondent considered this a regretful turn of events, since many women provided positive feedback to the survey.³³⁵ However, members of the women's council did not insist on being heard, as they wanted to avoid conflict and preferred 'peace over struggle' (*tynchtyk kerek!*). A school teacher, whose daughter-in-law had been part of the survey team, later considered that the *opposicionery* had simply tried to dismiss not only the kindergarten project, but all social projects, out of fear that the company would be able to 'buy the residents off.'³³⁶ In early 2015, Robust Resources that purchased 100% of Talas Copper Gold in December 2013, bypassed the Aral commission and allocated funds to the women's council independently. This move demonstrated that the commission had been ill equipped to adequately represent various interests of residents.

³³⁴ Interview with Jonathon Hornbrook, GIZ, Bishkek, June 2015.

³³⁵ Interview with a female resident #1, Aral, November 2014.

³³⁶ Interview with a school teacher, Aral, November 2014.



Figure 8: A slogan at the entrance of the Village Administration:
 ‘Those who are united will unite, those who are not united will split apart.’
 There are many of these slogans displayed in public places in Aral as
 ‘reminders’ of unity, state and nation (© Asel Doolotkeldieva)

By halting social projects, anti-mining activists precluded developments in the village. Collective meetings were an important group process for establishing cooperation among residents, as well as between the community and the company, and these aims were constantly being undermined. Reflecting on these developments, the Gold Fields country manager reacted bitterly:

I just wished the community had been able to articulate exactly what they wanted. To be able to make a final decision about whether to withdraw operations or not, I needed a firm and legitimate response from the ground. What I instead faced was too many divergent arguments, weak voices and a formless resistance.³³⁷

Although operation of the Aral commission took place in the aftermath of the demobilization of resistance, its work continued highlighting the fragmented nature of community and leadership. Amorphous or divided communities are often found in transition societies and state-building literature. During the Soviet era, integrative structures were present in rural areas such as collective

³³⁷ Conversation with the Country Director of Talas Copper Gold, David Grant, Bishkek, August 2012. A company may often want to shift its responsibility to a divided community; however, Grant’s observation seems to be correct in this instance.

kolkhozes and *sovkhozes*, cultural clubs, party cells, professional associations, women and youth enrolment activities and others. Presently, rural Kyrgyzstan has few modern integrative structures that are able to provide individuals with the necessary orientation to make sense of complex contemporary phenomena such as natural resource extraction. The situation of political governance on the ground has become so dire that foreign companies are obliged to become engaged in 'social-engineering' activities (and not simply corporate social responsibility, as the central government assumes),³³⁸ that is, to encourage or directly participate in the formation of various organizations on the ground. In the case of Aral, social engineering activities were aimed at involving social groups whose interests had generally been ill represented by existing structures of power. Thus, it became a real-time challenge to activate these segments of the population, who were interested in working at the mine because of the diversification of individual incomes it promised. These individuals included women, professional youths and the poor of the village, whose voices had been marginalized in favour of local politicians, men and landowners.

5.2. Failure to form an organization of resistance

In the remaining text, I will discuss other consequences of the proliferation of distrust on the trajectory of resistance. One such implication was the failure to form an efficient organization of resistance. The traditional social movement literature places special emphasis on the salience of organizational resources for the success of any collective enterprise. Within this literature, resource mobilization theory stresses that social movements must secure resources, a minimal form of organization, followers and a system of rewards for motivating

³³⁸ In an interview with the Head of the newly established Department of Mining at the Ministry of Economy, he stated that the mining operations were a matter of the relationship between the two, i.e., the mining company and the local community. The state has done its job by providing a liberal legislative framework, as well as the decentralization of government, where village governments receive full responsibility for mining activities. However, when the community was forced to cooperate with the company, residents complained that their weak local structures of power, which suffered severely from a lack of qualified personnel, were unable to cope with complex foreign actors on an equal foot. For similar processes of engagement of foreign corporate actors in nation-building in Mongolia see Jackson, S. L. (2015) 'Imagining the mineral nation: contested nation-building in Mongolia', *Nationalities Papers*, vol. 43, no. 3, pp. 437-456.

membership.³³⁹ Below, I discuss the efforts of the chief initiator of resistance, Sabyr Mamytov, for forming an organization and the limits of 'clan' or tribe-based mobilization.

Sabyr Mamytov made several attempts to form an organization using different local platforms. His focus, though, remained on the level of his native Chokoi *uruu*, who were meant to provide the main 'infrastructure' of mobilization. As already noted, he had been part of the opposition network that had assisted in overthrowing the Bakievs' regime. In February 2010, he went on to form a public association, Beishe Ata, which included primarily members of Chokoi *uruu*. In addition to this platform, he participated in many other provisional groups such as the Commission for removing the company, the Commission for land reclamation and many others. Within the framework of these various crosscutting and parallel platforms, Sabyr Mamytov carried out his political activism. For example, while he used the commissions to threaten the company and to write official complaints to the central government, Sabyr Mamytov employed his association, Beishe Ata, to participate in the company's business tenders and to request financial assistance for 'cultural' projects. Within this final framework, he obtained funds from Talas Copper Gold in order to promote the historical heritage of Chokoi *uruu* in the form of publishing a text on its genealogy.

In addition to Sabyr Mamytov's local profile, he became an active member of the regional network *Talas El Yntymagy* (Unity of Talas People) that comprises, according to information given by Sabyr Mamytov, approximately 3000 members, including 30 members from Aral. The main objective of this regional group consists of freezing all mining projects in Talas Province. The group participated in recent protests organized against the re-launching of the Jerooy gold factory in June and July 2015.

³³⁹ McCarthy, J. and Zald, M. (1977).

One may wonder about the extent of the proliferation of such local and regional provisional groups and networks, and the desire of individuals to either form them or to be integrated in them. Moreover, questions arise regarding the potential of these multiple platforms for providing a 'mass mobilization infrastructure,'³⁴⁰ as foregrounded in existing literature.³⁴¹ This question becomes even more intriguing when considering that the anti-mining group relied primarily on members of Chokoi *uruu* to mount their resistance. Yet, the Beishe Ata association did not thrive despite its promising cultural (Chokoi heritage) and economic (protecting farmers' interests on Chokoi lands) appeals, and did not become the backbone of the resistance. This became obvious even to Sabyr Mamytov when members of his association declined to pay their membership fees, which was 50 som per month (approximately \$1). Sustainable membership fees would allow for paying Sabyr Mamytov's salary, keeping an operational office and continuing organizational activities. As to the question of why members were reluctant to contribute their membership fees, Sabyr Mamytov could not provide a decisive answer:

Beishe Ata comprised between 60 to 70 farmers from Chokoi *uruu*. In 2012, I involved them in the land reclamation project that I won from the company. The plan was to splash water on the roads to decrease dust from passing tracks and to clean water springs that are located in the Taldy-Bulak area. That is how I thought to at least partially address the problem of holes left from excavations. For doing this job, people received three to four thousand soms monthly. But they did not want to work; by this time people had grown used to co-optation and wanted to receive money without working. When it came to a real work, they did not want to commit.³⁴²

Sabyr Mamytov was unwilling to provide more details about the fragmentation that had occurred within his association, instead placing all the blame on the mining company. Talking about these developments with other interviewees revealed a scandal that took place within the land reclamation project related to financial discrepancies. Following this scandal, people became reluctant to

³⁴⁰ Radnitz, S. (2010), p.131.

³⁴¹ Scott Radnitz demonstrated through the example of the Aksy events how a rural community had been employed by a member of the elite in his opposition to the regime. See Radnitz, S. (2010). Temirkulov and Kapalova (2014) also advanced the idea that *patrons can mobilize uruus*.

³⁴² Interview with Sabyr Mamytov, Aral, July 2015.

contribute personal money to the association, whose leader was suspected of the misuse of public funds. When asked about the incident, Sabyr Mamytov accused the mining company of generating and propagating these allegations with the objective of ruining his reputation and ultimately, to demobilize him. By this time, incidents such as these that involved mutual accusations and suspicions were taking place on a daily basis; it therefore became difficult to identify the real reasons for members of the Beishe Ata association falling out with Sabyr Mamytov, since each side had their own interpretation of events.

Against a backdrop of complex imagined and real relationships produced within the mining arena, an important point for me is that this example highlights the limits of clan or tribe-based political potential. Members of Chokoi seemed supportive of Sabyr Mamytov's contentious activities when the latter implied the 'game of politics', but showed less interest when the time was up for continued efforts of sustaining organization of resistance. If solidarity and networks based on *uruu* and territoriality played a certain role in helping activists to initiate mobilization, they appeared insufficient for providing lasting support. In another context regarding the distribution of natural resources and collective efforts, Bichsel makes a strong point that supports my findings:

Solidarity for such a collective effort is often expected to arise between people who are held to be close, such as extended family and kinship groups, as well as ethnic groups... Such expected solidarity may fade once water arrives in the canals, and therefore is situational and contextual.³⁴³

In line with Bichsel and contrary to Radnitz's suggestion, I argue that even strong norms framing personal behaviours such as belonging to a community have a limited capacity for providing sustainable resources for political mobilization. With the example of individuals showing that trust and solidarity must be created and maintained through repeated and consistent occasions, one can question the

³⁴³ Bichsel, C. (2009), pp. 52-53.

capacity of tradition, specifically, that of the Chokoi descent line, for self-reproduction as a political resource.³⁴⁴

5.3. Discrediting of politics and grassroots resistance

In this final section, I draw attention to another important consequence of the failed construction of collective action. Below, I present a collection of various opinions of residents that illustrate their understanding of and attitudes towards alternative politics in their village in the aftermath of mobilization. Although these perceptions of politics cannot be put into a historical perspective they advance nevertheless our understanding of the current processes of depoliticization in Kyrgyzstani society.

I am specifically interested in the ways that individuals perceive the role of opposition in political processes, since respondents identified the anti-mining activists as *opposicionery*. One informant from Chokoi *uruu* differentiated between only two types of activism in the village: corrupt activists (*prodajny*) and fanatics (*fanat*). From her simple typology, there is no middle ground that might combine the features of fanatics (e.g., commitment and beliefs) and features of corrupt activists (e.g., pragmatism and creativity), among others. Regardless, the respondent indicated that neither the corrupt activists nor the fanatics could be trusted. If the nature of the current opposition to mining is being perceived in this light, it is less surprising that resistance has acquired such a small genuine following in Aral. Another conversation with a resident and his wife about the behaviour of anti-mining activists revealed the following understanding of opposition and its role concerning mining operations:

[BA]: An *opposicioner*, in my opinion, is someone who has lost his job or who wants a job (*kymattan ketti je kymattka kirish*). If he receives monetary compensation for an unfulfilled expectation, he will let go of his frustration.

[AD]: Does the village need opposition?

[BA]: We need opposition, but it needs to be genuine and stable (*chynchyl jana turuktuu*) and needs to point out shortcomings and force the company

³⁴⁴ Wolters, A. (2013), p. 234.

to improve. But this is a hard work. One has to spend a lot of energy and time doing this to avoid the criticism of fellow villagers. Nobody pays you to do this. So who will agree to do it?³⁴⁵

From the above dialogue, one can conclude that resistance lacked authentic leadership that was ready to devote its own time and energy in the name of public service within the sphere of mining. These observations led the wife of the man interviewed above to conclude:

Opposition in Aral has no roots, no ground (*tuyu jok*). But those who take part in it are loud and they suppress the opinions of others. As a result many villagers remain in the middle (*ortodo*), and cannot choose whether to cooperate with the company or oppose to it.³⁴⁶

This is yet another powerful insight into the effects of fake resistance on the formation or rather, non-formation, of opinions among residents. The inability to formulate opinions about significant events reflects the bitter complaint made earlier by David Grant regarding an amorphous community with formless resistance. The inability to formulate opinions is further enforced if activists themselves do not take concrete positions within the conflict. Interestingly, when asked to describe his own political activity, Sabyr Mamytov declined being targeted as presenting opposition to incumbent politics and mining:

[OM]: I am not an opposition guy; I just do the people's job (*eldin ishin kylam*) because nobody else will.

[AD]: What kind of people's job is it?

[OM]: It is about voicing people's concerns and telling the truths that seniors and politicians in Bishkek won't listen to.

[AD]: Why did you take on this task?

[OM]: Because nobody trusts either the local institutions or central politicians. Somebody has to do it.

Although he did not present himself as engaging in alternative politics, Sabyr Mamytov assumed a public role by referring to what he did as 'the people's job'. This dialogue points to a more ambiguous status of activists within the realm of

³⁴⁵ Interview with a school deputy director, Aral, May 2015.

³⁴⁶ Interview with a female resident #2, Aral, May 2015.

the state-society nexus in contrast to workers-brokers in the previous empirical chapter, who clearly stated themselves as mediators within social conflicts.

I am further interested in how these perceptions of the role of activists structure understandings of the wider political arena within Aral. One informant drew a 'map of the anti-mining resistance' that in her imaginary corresponded to groups involved in the conflict:

1. The group 'for land' (*jer uchun*) – represents farmers whose lands may be exposed to future risks;
2. The group 'in the people' interests (*el uchun*) – represents those residents who are concerned in general with the well-being of the community;
3. The group 'in one's interests' (*ozun uchun*) – represents anti-mining activists who were later recognized as opportunist individuals.³⁴⁷

If the first two groups have a more or less clear status, the third group has acquired a bad reputation of spoilers, '*buzukular*'. According to residents, this group of spoilers had been responsible for the violent attacks on the mining company. However, even this structuration of mobilization does not offer any clear explanations, since the three groups are not homogenous or distinct, but overlap amongst themselves. For example, most of the actors who were in the spoilers' group were also landowners. However, they differed from the first group of 'real' landowners due to the fact that they currently do not make their living from owning land, but use land rhetoric to advance their environmental claims. As I expected, many farmers could not work their land because they were unable to afford the necessary inputs needed for doing so such as machinery, fertilizers and seeds. Therefore, according to the residents' perceptions, the size of the spoiler group fluctuated, depending on whether individuals wanted to conclude informal deals with the company or refrain from doing so.

Another resident, an employee of the *ayil okmot*, made an observation that perfectly echoes that of the resident interviewed above and which illustrates the fluid nature of the opposition:

³⁴⁷ Interview with a member of women's council, Aral, November 2014.

It is only a handful of individuals who pursue individual interests. We know them by appearance, maybe 10 to 15 people maximum. Yet this group becomes large at times. Nowadays, people are fighting for survival and need to look after their own needs rather than a common interest.³⁴⁸

In addition to these perceptions, I heard two popular expressions that further nuance the meaning of such opportunism. '*Ortogo salyp ishtoo*' ('doing business in the middle') and '*sekiruu*' (literally, 'jumping') was employed to identify individuals or middlemen that shift from one side to another. Residents closely observed and subsequently commented on these movements with sarcasm. However, these terms were used to refer to many individuals whose positions were ambiguous or undecided. These striking insights also echoed a reflection by one of the oldest anti-mining leaders from the Bek-Moldo village (located near the Jerooy deposit in Talas Province, the second largest gold-mining project after Kumtor) concerning the fluid structure of leadership in the field of grassroots resistance:

Let's imagine a situation in a village. Presently, people don't shy away from criticizing one another. It's enough for one guy to propose some populist ideas that cannot be verified or implemented and have him succeed in mobilizing support. However, such support will be short-lived, since tomorrow, others or even seniors from the capital may arrive with even more populist ideas. In Soviet times, it was clear who the authority was in the village. This is no longer the case. Today, if I don't visit these villages frequently enough, I stop being able to recognize young leaders. Every time I visit, I see new faces, new leaders.³⁴⁹

Some observations are important for helping to understand these local perspectives. First, residents' views reinforced my understanding that brokers' activities do not go unnoticed by the local audience. The latter differentiates and categorizes the types of so-called 'leaders' according to their commitment to collective and private interests. Those who represent only personal interests are labelled 'spoilers'; however, normative action cannot be taken against them, because the group of spoilers is extendible and can include new, previously genuine individuals at any time. To a certain degree, this differentiation helps the

³⁴⁸ Interview with a female employee of Village Administration, Aral, May 2015.

³⁴⁹ Author interview with Sarymjan Toktoshev, September, Bishkek 2013.

local audience to orient itself and navigate using caution when engaging with opaque local politics. Yet it means that neither the structure of leadership nor the structure of membership that constitute a basis for sustainable mobilization has been established in Aral. For social practices of insurgency in the Kyrgyzstani periphery, this means that any attempt to launch collective action faces significant obstacles in terms of uncertainty and contingent commitment. In Western societies, the commitment of participants in social movements is dependent on their adherence to the cause and their own personal beliefs; however, commitment of participants in the underdeveloped periphery is subject to more existential issues. Furthermore, it seems that the impact of neoliberal reforms on social issues has led to the erosion of social structures of integration, which could have played an important role in terms of preserving collective efforts arising from opportunist behaviour. The current inflation of opportunist practices testifies to the increasingly precarious nature of the social fabric and its decreasing potential for resisting and withstanding potential external threats. I therefore find it difficult to place any belief in the efficiency of stable patronage networks that run all the way down from the centre to villages and which cast unconditional political support in those at the top.³⁵⁰

Conclusions

Major controversies regarding the country's largest gold-mining project, Kumtor, gave rise to nationalist sentiments and environmental concerns country-wide. One may therefore have expected rural communities that supported the traditional Kyrgyz lifestyle to have successfully protested against non-transparent foreign mining projects and the neo-liberal fragmented state. However, resistance in Aral fell apart after a year of tension, unlike the successful resistance that took place in the neighbouring Kopuro-Bazar, where access to Andash mine has been shut down since 2011.

³⁵⁰ For similar findings in the context of the development of political parties, see Doolotkeldieva, A. (2015) 'Development of parties and the pre-election situation in the regions. Perspective of regional party representatives', *Friedrich Ebert Foundation*, Bishkek.

In this empirical chapter, I provided an example of a failed attempt of constructing sustainable resistance. Thus, the initial phase of mobilization, which included public gatherings, writing complaints to state institutions and violent attacks on the mining company did not lead to the successful sustainability of resistance. I linked this failure to dynamics of open politics that led to the exposure of informal deals and private interests among the core group of anti-mining critics. I showed how the provisional open space that was purposefully created in Aral with the aim of convincing residents to join the anti-mining cause has, paradoxically, disserved the organizers.

The empirical case pointed out that trust in the organization of resistance holds critical decisiveness for the path of mobilization. Trust is a precondition for lasting grassroots practices of contestation and protesting because a traceable consistency concerning activists' commitment to collective interests remains the only orientation left for to-be-members in the context of generalized distrust and institutional uncertainty. In a different context of successful associations, Bichsel quotes a participant of collective action whose reflections appear to be supportive of my argument:

It was expressed by members of the association that there was strong cohesion among the villagers. A member explained that, 'Leaders are very important. They help people to continue the work. Since the beginning, they did not try to deceive us, and that is why people continue to support them'. Thus, honesty and accountability qualify leadership.³⁵¹

Another environmental NGO that had been active in the gold sector noted the destructive effects of distrust in connection to struggles for power:

Local leaders did not always understand the whole picture. They did not always accept our arguments, many of them hoped that they could resolve their problems by directly appealing to the president, and they saw our arguments as a simple struggle for power.³⁵²

³⁵¹ Bichsel, C. (2009), p. 81.

³⁵² Buxton, C. (2011), p.93.

This leads me to formulating another finding from this empirical case: the creation of resistance beyond the core group of believers requires basic conditions of 'visibility' or publicity. Since the infrastructure that enables individuals to observe public figures and their claims is weak in rural Kyrgyzstan, public gatherings served the purpose. This aspect can advance our theoretical considerations about Kyrgyzstani society. The example puts forward the notion that it is essential for individuals to observe a lasting political position for their continuous participation in social mobilizations. Individuals did not take for granted nationalist and environmental claims, but instead scrutinized the very cause and initiators of mobilization. Thus, the problematization of the production of trust as a reciprocal dynamic 'brings back' rural residents in our analyses as reflexive, active and contesting individuals. As such, the rejection of participating in fake mobilization questions existing theories pertaining to elite manipulation and clan mobilization.

Observations from the two empirical studies remain that need to be addressed. In the next chapter, I will provide a comparative interpretation of data.

CHAPTER VI: A COMPARATIVE INTERPRETATION OF EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

The two empirical chapters have generated a large volume of observations that can be further illuminated if compared. In this chapter, I will continue discussing empirical findings by turning back to the literature and reflecting on the conceptual propositions that I have formulated at the beginning of the dissertation. Based largely on an inductive approach, this chapter attempts to build on variations of independent variables observed in two contentious sites and formulate conceptual conclusions about the nature of social mobilizations in rural Kyrgyzstan. The chapter is organized into three parts: in the first part, I will briefly discuss the main similarities and differences between two case studies; in the second part, I will reflect on the variations of two independent variables and different outcomes of the dependent variable. Specifically, I will look at: (1) **how initiators of initial mobilization overcome generalized suspicion by proving their commitment to collective interests;** 2) **how participants of initial mobilization establish trust in initiators and agree to participate in subsequent mobilizations.** I argued in Chapter III that these two conditions are accountable for the formation of structured mobilizations in the Kyrgyzstani context, as characterized by generalized distrust and corrupt politics. In the third part I will discuss the intervening variable – brokers – that tend to fragment integrity within protest groups.

I. Grassroots Mobilizations in the Kyrgyzstani Periphery

At the start of my empirical research, I explicitly selected two cases that vary in terms of geography and modes of economic and political organization. One contentious site represents the mobilization of a segment of a rural community against a foreign mining firm and the weak state in the northern province of Talas. The second contentious site exemplifies the mobilization of workers in a small town against central power system, in the southern province of Jalal-Abad. Despite these geographic and organizational distinctions, the cases share a set of traits that are specific to the context and mode of mobilization. *First*, in both cases, peripheral dissent began immediately following major political changes in the capital in April of 2010. Local groups reacted to opportunities brought about by the revolution in a bid to change their existing local orders. *Second*, in both cases, groups suffered at the outset from weak internal resources and a lack of experience in engaging in contentious politics. *Third*, against the background of dire socioeconomic conditions at the periphery and a lack of resources, the selected case studies showed from the very beginning an impressive capacity for the self-organization of individuals, whether in terms of reviving a longstanding Soviet-type union or forming new associations. In both localities, actors resorted to 'conventional' means of contestation such as organizing public discussions, writing petitions and appealing to courts, before turning to 'unconventional' means such as protests and violent actions. *Fourth*, my case studies are examples of resistance of the 'periphery' against the 'centre'. In both instances, actors opposed central policies and institutions in the sphere of the extractive industry, as well as the state management of resources. Despite the fact that the main opponents in the case studies were the foreign mining firm and central elites respectively, the state became the target of social dissent because it came to be treated as a mediator of societal conflicts. The involvement of the state had important implications for widening the structure of conflict, which was initially conceived within local arenas but extended to involve central politics. *Finally*, both case studies exhibited the placing of significant value on the independent variables under question: initiators and participants of initial mobilization actively engaged in the production of trust *via* group interactions,

but the outcomes of these interactions were varied. The main analytical differences and similarities between the two cases are briefly summarized in the table below.

Feature	Case: Community-based mobilization in Aral village ('mechanical solidarity')	Case: Labour-based mobilization in Kochkor-Ata town ('organic solidarity') ³⁵³
Structural basis	<p>Village</p> <p>Type of economic activity: agriculture and livestock production</p> <p>Segmental type: <i>uruu</i>-based and territorial</p> <p>Degree of interdependence: few integrative local structures</p>	<p>Town</p> <p>Type of economic activity: industry</p> <p>Organized type: based on the division of labour</p> <p>Degree of interdependence: multiple integrative local structures</p>
Type of parties of contention	Group of residents versus foreign miner and central government	Work force, local union and new management versus central institutions and elites
Type of agenda	Simple: 'against mining operations' with no alternative agenda	Complex: 'against corruption' with an alternative agenda
Type of actions against opponents	<p>Few village gatherings and peaceful marches;</p> <p>Minor sabotage of mining operations and violent attacks on the company;</p>	<p>Multiple large and minor protests;</p> <p>Legal actions;</p> <p>Building alliances with central political actors;</p> <p>Other actions</p>

³⁵³ I borrow here Durkheim's differentiation of mechanic and organic solidarities since such basic sociology is useful for the purpose of putting the two cases in starker contrast. See Durkheim, E. (1997) *The Division of Labour in Society*, translated by Halls, W.D., New York: Free Press.

	No alliances with central political actors	
Type of political response to local contention	Central government abstains from conflict between community and miner	Central government makes concessions to certain demands of the labour movement
Type of brokerage	Beishe Ata association (later discredited)	People's Defense Committee (later sidelined)
Group processes	<p>Learning process: consciousness-raising</p> <p>Monitoring process: failure to establish trust</p> <p>Collective decision-making: partial success of collective decision-making</p> <p>Collective empowerment: divided political community</p>	<p>Learning process: consciousness-raising</p> <p>Monitoring process: successful production of trust</p> <p>Collective decision-making: successful establishment of regular mechanisms of collective decision-making</p> <p>Collective empowerment: successful episodes of mobilization and a growing belief in the success of collective action</p>
Type of outcome	Failure to form sustained mobilization	Successful formation of sustained mobilization

Table 9: Differences and similarities between case studies

After drawing on these preliminary similarities and distinctions, I will now discuss the two conditions that brought about diverse outcomes of sustainability of mobilization in the case studies.

II. Production of Trust and the Formation of Conditions for Structured Mobilization

This part of the chapter serves the purpose of taking a closer look at the empirical manifestations of two conditions and their impact on the dependent variable. Specifically, I aimed to discover to what extent initiators and participants of initial mobilization engaged in trust production via the group processes that emerged from this engagement. In Chapter III, I insisted that formation of trust is essential to the sustainability of grassroots mobilizations in the difficult context of discredited leadership, corrupt organizations, and uncertain political environment. This type of trust is created and maintained through monitoring in public spaces, rather than through pre-existing social structures and/or patronage networks. I will develop my critique of existing static explanations of patronage networks in the final chapter of the thesis. I also claimed that the production of trust is a dynamic process and requires the participation of both sides. Thus, initiators of resistance have to overcome existing suspicions among local observers by proving that they represent collective interests. This process is not a sporadic event but takes place continuously in order to offset ever-emerging suspicions on the part of the audience. Participants do not attend to the process of verification passively. Participants of mobilization have to be able to observe the behaviour of initiators and other participants to be able to make informed decisions about whether to continue participation. Hence, here, too, the production of trust has to take place in a prolonged and repeated fashion. I refer to this process of the initial production of trust as a *monitoring process*. As informed by the above, the monitoring process accompanies the development of mobilization throughout its entire lifespan, since trust production has to permanently struggle against generalized suspicions that have already settled as the result of a legacy of non-democratic governance. Although the monitoring process is a continuous exercise, I argue that once trust in the authenticity of initiators has been established and the commitment of participants has been created and maintained, provisional episodes of mobilization can hope to sustain themselves.

Thus, the production of trust is a necessary condition for structured mobilizations. If participants of mobilization can believe they are not being cheated, trust can give rise to other group processes that will further enhance opportunities for sustainability.

The outcomes of such policing can therefore lead to both the successful construction of a protest movement (the Kochkor-Ata case), as well as to further social fragmentation (the Aral case). This contrasting potential of group processes leads me to suggest that they involve highly contingent and unpredictable outcomes. Furthermore, the importance of group processes gives critical weight to the fact that the fate of grassroots mobilization is decided internally. Maintenance and the disintegration of mobilization are therefore a result of internal factors rather than external pressures only.

I also listed three specific group processes: *collective learning*, *collective decision-making* and *collective empowerment*. My conceptualization of the production of trust as a resource that is specifically required in the Kyrgyzstani context was inspired by the approaches of Hirsch and Fantasia, who view the creation of increased commitment and solidarity bonds in association, i.e. within group processes. Below, I summarize empirical findings about these processes in each case, as well as across both cases.

2.1. Construction of sustained mobilization: the case of the labour-based Movement for Truth (Kochkor-Ata)

In this section I would like to demonstrate a successful case in which production of trust has led to transformation of initial unstructured episodes of mobilization into sustained mobilization. As was shown in Chapter IV, the labour Movement for Truth emerged from a provisional structure that consisted of a divided workforce, contested leadership and improvised episodes of mobilization. In four years, the movement managed to become a structured group based on legitimate leadership, committed membership and an established repertoire of

collective action. I have attempted to show that this structuration had been the result of internal processes of learning, collective decision-making and collective empowerment through episodes of collective action. Achieving this had not been easy, since the organization of mobilization had to resort to costly endeavours in order to prove to the local audience their authenticity and commitment to collective interests. The Kyrgyzneftegaz company, in which mobilization took roots, offered multiple opportunities for repeated interactions that gave both the initiators and participants of mobilization opportunities to deliberate on the one hand, and to check and monitor each other on the other hand.

The production of trust in these repeated interactions led to the formation of legitimate leadership and membership structures. Moreover, conditions were also created for engaging in extensive learning processes, which allowed workers and management to gain novel experience in protest-making, gaining access to information about the functioning of the central power system and acquiring knowledge about opponents located in the capital. The labour movement also engaged in an impressive volume of protests, strikes, political lobbying and legal actions. Throughout this engagement with various opponents, workers established an impressive record of victories that in turn dramatically enhanced their belief in the success of collective action and instilled among them the feeling of belonging to a collective endeavour. Finally, the collective decision-making process introduced democratic mechanisms of deliberation and decision-making, which contributed to the sustained participation of members in mobilization. Of course, these processes were rather intermixed and took place simultaneously within the same avenues or sites. Yet, the monitoring of the organization of resistance and the ensuing trust in it led to the success of other processes. I have distinguished them into separate processes for the sake of analytical and conceptual clarity.

At this point, I wish to pause to reflect on one such site, which hosted various group processes, i.e., the all-workers meetings. Let me remind that one of the

main elements of the labour movement was the local union that together with the management helped sustaining mobilizations. Apart from actual episodes of collective action, the union promoted and organized important all-workers meetings, which were designed to collectively discuss issues of production and politics on a regular basis. Establishment of this mechanism of collective decision-making was a result of commitment to internal democratic governance, which workers learned to appreciate throughout their four-year mobilization. During the course of mobilization, general meetings became a salient mechanism that provided endless opportunities for discussing ongoing events, to construct ever-new grievances and to prepare for new rounds of mobilization. As per Snow et al.'s (1986) concept of frame alignment, meetings transformed into perfect platforms for the operationalization of diagnostic, prognostic and motivational frameworks. I was able to observe how workers used these meetings to present their claims for general debate, enhance their arguments, convince other members, find the desired approval and subsequently mobilize for action. On the one hand, these processes may slow down actual mobilization of workers; on the other hand, the regularity and unanimity of these meetings increased the sustainability of this infrastructure of social interactions. Such an infrastructure is also more likely to provide the secured mobilization of participants in times of action, because individuals come to know one another through regularized social interactions.

Another outcome of these regular meetings was the growing politicization of workers. In these meetings, consciousness-raising and the politicization of workers against central politics and the power system took place. As one participant noted, 'in the past, workers were not involved in politics. Now they learned how to engage with politics.'³⁵⁴ This politicization led to workers being aware of their rights and not letting themselves be deceived by elites and state institutions. This construction of self against evasive central politics also gave rise to the valorisation of labour culture and a celebration of the meaningfulness

³⁵⁴ Interview with a brigadier, Kochkor-Ata, December 2013.

of workers' jobs. As a participant noted, 'we produce and procure southern regions with gas. We are doing an important job here. And these politicians, what do they understand about what we really do?',³⁵⁵

Finally, regular meetings contributed to the creation of opportunities for movement reproduction. By reproduction, I refer to labour mobilization that achieves a stage of organization of material and non-material resources that it can reproduce itself. This point was highlighted by constructivist theorists. Nicklas Luhmann for example suggested that social movements generated 'new topics when the old ones have run their course'.³⁵⁶ Following Luhmann, Klaus Japp argued that at the early stage of mobilization there is a 'readiness to criticize and protest' and only then can a topic of public relevance be made the movement's focus.³⁵⁷ Protests are therefore not triggered by issues, but rather by the form – protesting. In Kochkor-Ata, the movement has also reached a phase of development in which it could reproduce itself from within. As an example, the last time I visited the town in January 2015, I observed an interesting development. During meetings, workers were creating new concerns in a bid to expand their field of mobilization to new areas of government policies. Such expansion of grievances and concerns meant that the movement was able to branch into new directions and create for itself new topics of focus, which in turn would give rise to new rounds of mobilization and thereby secure the maintenance of the movement. As such, I put forward the argument that according to the history of this mobilization, which had been achieved over the course of four years, the process gave ordinary workers the confidence to engage in a wide range of contentious topics against various opponents. This points to the development of the labour movement into a phase where resistance is carried out for the sake of resistance.

³⁵⁵ Interview with a head of gas distribution, Kochkor-Ata, January 2015.

³⁵⁶ Luhmann, N. (1993) *Risk: A sociological theory*, translated by Barrett, R., New York: Aldine de Gruyter translated by Barrett.

³⁵⁷ Japp, K. (1999) 'The form of protest in the new social movements', in Baecker, D. (ed.) *Problems of form*, Stanford University Press, p. 156.

In summary, it can be said that in the case of the labour movement in Kochkor-Ata, trust was successfully established and maintained *via* group processes. Furthermore, group processes permitted the initially fragmented episodes of mobilization to grow into structured mobilization. Only when repeated trust had been established in the organization of mobilization, did a scale shift take place in the labour-based mobilization in Kochkor-Ata. It can therefore be stated that there is a direct causal relationship between trust in authentic organization and growth/consolidation of a protest group.

2.2. Deconstruction of initial mobilization: the case of rural mobilization (Aral)

The anti-mining mobilization in Aral village is an example of a failed case. I included a failed case in my thesis because it perfectly shows exactly where and why mobilization fails. This case demonstrates the stages of mobilization in which the anti-mining resistance has started with genuine claims but ended up with a corrupt leadership and discredited organization. The failed case tells us that the decline in participation in mobilization happens where the shift of public awareness about the fake organization takes place. Any pre-existing informal networks based on kin or 'tribe' that constituted at least some part of the initial mobilization could not mitigate this shift. In this section I will once again take a closer look at those instances where the public awareness shifted against the organization of anti-mining mobilization.

The primary instances in which the local audience could form opinions about the worthiness of joining the collective action were public village gatherings and partly the specialized Aral commission meetings. During these meetings, fellow residents realized that activists were not being consistent in their opposition to mining. These inconsistencies gained even more negative connotations as a result of the news that some of activists had been offered jobs at the mining camp, as well as opportunities to conduct private business with the company. As a result, gatherings ended up unravelling petty power struggles and the

opportunism of fellow residents, and undermining many previous established social relationships within the village. From sites of collective diagnosis and frame-making, local gatherings turned into instances of mutual criticism and blame-laying. Most importantly, the exposure of activist informal agendas led to the discrediting of the public anti-mining cause and demotivated individuals to commit to it.

Thus, unlike the previous empirical case, group processes and mechanisms in Aral village led to demobilization and further social fragmentation. From this empirical case, I therefore conclude that the observation of 'good' behaviour of others is a pre-condition for collective action. This finding contrasts with the findings of existing literature that viewed a pre-existing identity and networks as a condition *sine qua non* for collective action. My findings suggest that in the context of the post-Soviet disintegration of social structures and neoliberal reforms, even pre-existing identities and facilitative networks are not enough for inspiring action. Trust in authenticity of collective action is gained *in action* and during *group* processes, not individual. Group processes permit the observation of behaviours that had previously been hidden by informal politics. This function of group processes is closely linked to current conditions of public space and its infrastructure in rural Kyrgyzstan. In the absence of other means to systematically track political positions, group processes that had been activated for a different purpose inadvertently turned into such a medium of observation. This case concerning the deconstruction of a protest movement exhibits the growing need for public space in Kyrgyzstan. One can therefore read the uprisings at the periphery not as an expression of the predicament of socioeconomic underdevelopment only, but as attempts by ordinary citizens to organize spaces for local discussion and for establishing practices of public scrutiny.³⁵⁸

³⁵⁸ To borrow from Jürgen Habermas's concept of 'publicity'; see Habermas, J. (1991) *Structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

What do such social practices regarding the monitoring of commitment tell us about the bigger picture of politics? On the one hand, the abundance of group dynamics that do not always lead to normatively expected coherent protest agendas and uniform demonstrations may imply that group dynamics are merely performances.³⁵⁹ However, if we fail to understand the internal dynamics that shape these group processes, we may also fail to recognize the fact that they fulfil first and foremost an internal need for self-regulation and subsequent group formation. This leads me to suggest that social mobilizations that appear to lack meaning are aimed first and foremost at an *internal audience* rather than at external observers. This is an important finding, as it proposes understanding the formation and sustainability of mobilizations as foremost taking place during actual mobilization and less so prior to or in its aftermath.

Another way to address the difference between two cases will be to look closer at the organization of two mobilizations. Both organizations had been subjected to informal politics of brokers and both suffered from the loss of integrity and credibility. However, again I have two stark examples of how the organizations of mobilization were dealt with. The labour movement had only been partially influenced by brokers, whereas the organization of anti-mining mobilization was conceived and dominated by brokers. I will consider these points in detail in the next section.

III. Brokerage: an Important Antecedent Condition

At the start of conceptualizing my preliminary empirical findings, I argued that brokers constituted an intervening variable that had a magnifying effect on the fragmentation of social mobilizations. More specifically, they corrupt and discredit the organization of mobilization. If brokers dominate the organization of mobilization the leadership of organization will less likely enjoy legitimacy and support within the local audience. In return, by acquiring a bad reputation

³⁵⁹ Reeves, M., Rosanayagam, J. and Beyer, J. (ed.) (2014) *Ethnographies of the state in Central Asia: Performing politics*, Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press.

brokers also undermine their own activities in the long run. Later, however, I realized that brokerage encompassed much more than the actions of individual actors; brokerage should be rather understood as a social practice emerging as a response to the surrounding political climate, which in turn exposes individuals to opportunism. It will therefore be more useful to analyse this phenomenon as an antecedent condition that serves as a background to social mobilizations and politics. Although the case methodology does not particularly allow for making direct observations about the antecedent conditions, it still permits hypothesizing about its features on the basis of empirical findings (Van Evera, 1997). In the remaining part of this chapter, I will first elaborate on brokers as actors who perform certain functions and second, on brokerage as an emerging salient practice that has real implications for politics and collective actions.

Looking back at the two empirical chapters, my accounts of brokerage practices appear ambivalent at best. I noticed that in every case, a societal grievance or concern was compromised at some point of protest-making by actors with vague positions and unclear interests within the protest groups. These actors came across as charismatic, outspoken, energetic and well informed; however, their commitment to the protest agenda was unstable during the course of events and gave rise to significant suspicion among ordinary participants. In the case of the labour-based movement, a number of salaried workers founded the People's Defense Committee and clearly stated that their role encompassed 'bridging' between central authorities and local constituencies, in particular, the workers' movement. For some time, the People Defense Committee was part of the organization of mobilization. In case of community-based mobilization, organizers of the anti-mining mobilization found themselves in an ambiguous situation when residents revealed the contradiction between their informal pursuit of power and publicly shared environmental concerns. These organizers claimed, again, to have been 'bridging' between the community and the 'absent' state. The positioning of these specific actors in the middle between the periphery and centre led me to adopt the term 'broker' to define an intermediary

function that connects previously unconnected entities.

This otherwise beneficial function turned out to be detrimental to social mobilizations in Kyrgyzstani contexts, however. In both cases, these actors, whom I call brokers, were identified and ultimately sidelined. In Kochkor-Ata town, this process was proactive in the sense that workers marginalized the People's Defense Committee and made their union the principal representative body for the sake of avoiding the discrediting of their movement. By removing this broker, the movement 'streamlined' its organization and professionalized its engagement with central opponents. In Aral village, the process of discrediting brokers was passive, since the public condemnation of the second attack and the ensuing demobilization of the anti-mining resistance by default caused the marginalization of the organizers of mobilization. As a result, the exposure of brokers led not only to their removal, but also to the disintegration of mobilization altogether.

This is only one aspect of the problem concerning brokerage. Other evidence showed that many other participants acted at times as brokers. Ordinary participants of mobilization made attempts to use collective grievances in order to advance private interests or seek integration into some 'political game'. I came to conclusion, therefore, that it is impossible to estimate the scope of brokers in a given contentious site, as any participant can at any minute become an astute intermediary under the influence of a corrupt political environment. With this complication in mind, I turn to existing literature on the social and political functions of brokers with the hope that such a discussion will allow me to better understand the empirical and theoretical implications of their proliferation on collective action in Kyrgyzstan.

3.1. Brokers' functions

Brokers have been treated contrarily by social sciences. For my purposes, the literature on brokerage can roughly be subdivided into two domains for the sake

of clarity. On the one hand, in the area of organizational and network studies, brokers have come to be treated as indispensable actors that fill in a 'gap' or provide a 'bridge' between disconnected entities, mediate 'structural holes' and therefore, make provision for the undisturbed flow of information and services. On the other hand, anthropologists and political scientists have noted the pervasive effect of brokers in electoral politics, in centre-periphery state building, in development aid, in patron-client relationships and other spheres that touch resources and power. What unites these two theoretical strands is that brokers function as intermediaries between different groups and these accounts portray largely successful examples of broker intervention. I will draw ideas from each of these camps for the benefit of my conceptualization of brokerage, since traditional social movement theory has to date paid insufficient attention to this phenomenon in the area of social mobilizations. I link this gap to the fact that SMT had been developed in Western institutionalized societies where even broker roles are determined and structured, and therefore rarely pose a problem for social movements.

How can we understand the emergence of brokers in various spheres of human activity? Scholars of different disciplines agree that brokers provide mediation between different groups. Network theorist Ronald Burt conceptualizes brokerage in the following terms:

Strategy guided by brokerage involves locating a position at the edge of two groups, and building relations between dissimilar people. Brokerage must be the more difficult strategy, but the further difference is that brokerage is explicitly about action that cuts across structural holes in the current social structure.³⁶⁰

Burt further describes a person called Robert who easily navigates between different networks, controls for information and yields benefits by mediating between previously unconnected networks or people. Fernandez and Gould continue this line of inquiry and highlight that the flow of authentic information is

³⁶⁰ Burt, R. S. (2000) 'The network structure of social capital', *Research in Organizational Behavior*, vol. 22, pp. 345-423.

at the core of brokers' legitimacy and sustainability. Brokers are interested in delivering the 'right' information that promotes more collaboration among groups and which therefore render brokers desirable by prospective participants.³⁶¹ This type of context is characterized by the provision of access to perfect information and knowledge, which proved difficult to access on the part of Kyrgyzstani brokers.

In relation to social movements, brokerage has not received much attention and existing approaches treat this phenomenon in relatively beneficial terms. Consider Diani's assessment of brokerage:

Brokers' most crucial property lies in their capacity to connect actors who are not communicating because of some specific political or social barrier, rather than the mere absence of practical opportunities... In the case of the Milan environmental movement in the mid-1980s, barriers consisted mostly of the well-known differences between conservation and political ecology traditions. It is on such occasions that brokerage is crucial for the survival of chains of interaction, and therefore for the connectedness of a network as a whole.³⁶²

In the above-mentioned case of environmental SMOs in Italy, in addition to sharing information, brokers' activities consisted of establishing ties with distant actors and forging connections with prospect allies – activities that increase membership and network expansion. Diani makes another important point about 'barriers'. Brokers emerge due to such barriers, or as previously noted by Burt, due to structural holes. In the Kyrgyzstani context, one can hypothesize about sources of barriers; these might be, for example, found within the centre-periphery structure of political communications.³⁶³ For example, in Western

³⁶¹ Fernandez, R. and Gould, R. (1994).

³⁶² Diani, M. (2003) 'Leaders or brokers? Positions and influence in social movement networks, in Diani, M. and McAdam, D. (ed.) *Social movements and networks: Relational approaches to collective action*, New York: Oxford University Press, p. 107.

³⁶³ Another source of barriers is the extractive industry itself. For example, the mining process, which was novel for Aral village with its emphasis on a new, transnational, mode of production, juxtaposed with local 'traditional' modes of production, created stark oppositions that required the emergence of mediators for negotiation. The process of the vernacularization of foreign economic projects is not straightforward and the 'absence' of the state was clearly a strategic mistake made by the neo-liberal government, which decided that an impoverished community would benefit from the expertise, knowledge and experience offered by the mining company.

contexts, SMOs that work towards changing official policies collaborate directly with local decision-making bodies and rarely do so with higher echelons of power.³⁶⁴ However, Kyrgyzstani protest movements have to directly address the highest bodies of power, since local political institutions are devoid of power; these movements therefore have to overcome many bureaucratic and political barriers. Although the focus of my dissertation is not directly linked to this topic, on several occasions throughout my empirical chapters I had the opportunity to illustrate the ways in which peripheral protesters attempted to overcome the centre-periphery structure of political relationships in their efforts to attract the attention of the central government, or to exploit weak political communications between local constituencies and the central government. A result of this was the organization of private delegations to the capital that were designed to establish contact with elites and to gain access to information, which became a chief concern of local brokers in the case of the workers' Movement for Truth. In the case of community-based mobilization, such trips to Bishkek were much more limited, due to a lack of organizational resources. Brokers nevertheless travelled to the capital in order to gain access to independent ecological experts and members of Parliament. I find the grey zone in which local actors meet with central actors and the ensuing new political practices a promising direction for future research. These new political practices give rise to concepts of brokerage that present alternative avenues for thinking about the nature of politics in Central Asia. I will come back to this crucial point in the concluding chapter of this dissertation.

Returning to the question of connecting groups (or overcoming holes or barriers), Gould and Fernandez studied the American public health sector and identified five structurally distinct types of brokers that 'follow from a partitioning of actors into non overlapping subgroups.'³⁶⁵ These are differentiated as follows: (1) a 'liaison' role, a type of brokerage relation in which all three actors belong to

³⁶⁴ Diani, M. (2003).

³⁶⁵ Fernandez, R. and Gould, R. (1994).

different groups; (2) a 'representative' role; (3) a 'gatekeeper' role, in which an actor secures external resources and distributes them within their group; (4) 'cosmopolitan' or 'itinerant' broker, where two actors may belong to the same subgroup while the intermediary belongs to a different group; (5) a 'local broker' or 'coordinator' – indicates someone who mediates between actors that all belong to the same group. In this elaborated effort to conceptualize communications within social settings, the key to understanding Gould and Fernandez's typology are ideas pertaining to 'impartiality' and the non-overlapping positioning of brokers. I stress these two aspects because they are important for my study of brokerage:

Occupants of liaison and itinerant roles, who by definition link actors with interests dissimilar to their own...will be able to convert their structural position into influence only if they generally refrain from public advocacy of policies. In contrast, occupants of representative and gatekeeper roles should derive influence from their position irrespective of their stands on issues, because boundary spanners are expected to share goals of their own groups.³⁶⁶

Brokers' impartiality and influence are therefore subject to the type of role they play. Diani's observation echoes the quote above, as he notes, 'playing a brokerage role does not seem to affect the public profile of SMOs in a significant way, if not for the very core organizations.'³⁶⁷ In Western contexts, brokerage positions in the middle imply some degree of fluidity; nonetheless, they remain structured positions, due to the expectations others have of the specific functions of brokers. These expectations appear to structure commitment to impartiality and the specific roles assigned to brokers in a given social setting. In Kyrgyzstan, it is unclear to which degree brokers remain loyal to their initial positions.

In the second group of literature, brokers are once again shown to operate at the boundary. This time, however, the boundaries demarcate complex political and economic relationships between, (1) clients (which are generally a local and

³⁶⁶ Ibid.

³⁶⁷ Diani, M. (2003), p. 113.

usually disfranchised population) and patrons (individuals with status)³⁶⁸; (2) between the state and 'localisms' in the former's effort to expand spatially³⁶⁹; (3) between politicians and voters³⁷⁰ and between others. The research that focuses on these issues is extremely useful, as these studies stress firstly the ways in which brokerage has played a significant role in historical processes. Second, they emphasize the wider functions that brokers fulfil in these diverse political and socioeconomic settings. Third, they highlight, perhaps most importantly, the conflicting and dynamic model between brokers and their environment. Anton Block, who has studied the Italian mafia, writes, for example,

The *mafioso* can therefore be considered as a variety of the political middleman or power broker, since his *raison d'être* is predicated upon his capacity to acquire and maintain control over the paths linking the local infrastructure of the village to the superstructure of the larger society.³⁷¹

Another important author, Eric Wolf, who studied social relations in Mexico, reflects on brokers' roles in the following terms:

Their basic function is to relate community-oriented individuals who want to stabilize or improve their life chances, but who lack economic security and political connections with nation-oriented individuals... [Brokers] must serve some of the interests of groups operating on both the community and the national level, and they must cope with the conflicts raised by the collision of these interests. They cannot settle them, since by doing so they would abolish their own usefulness to others.³⁷²

Wolf makes a crucial point here: on the one hand, a broker must satisfy some of the needs of his protégées; on the other hand, this satisfaction must not be complete, otherwise the former may no longer require the broker's services. This finding echoes the difficulties that Kyrgyzstani brokers face in the field of social mobilizations. Wolf's conceptualization of the limited exercise of brokers'

³⁶⁸ Radnitz, S. (2010); Wolf, E. (1956) 'Aspects of group relations in a complex society: Mexico', *American Anthropologist*, vol. 58, no. 6, December, pp. 1065-1078.

³⁶⁹ Hillmann, H. (2008) 'Localism and the limits of political brokerage: evidence from revolutionary Vermont', *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 114, no. 2, September, pp. 287-331.

³⁷⁰ Auyero, J. (2000) 'The logic of clientelism in Argentina: An ethnographic account', *Latin American Research Review*, vol. 35, no. 3, pp. 55-81.

³⁷¹ Block, A. (1974) *The mafia in a Sicilian village, 1860-1960: A study of violent peasant entrepreneurs*, Waveland Press, p.7.

³⁷² Wolf, E. (1956).

functions can to some extent explain why Kyrgyzstani brokers help protesters to engage in contentious politics, but are not fully interested in the immediate resolution of their grievances and concerns. A prompt response to societal issues will eliminate the future need for brokers in this contentious field.

Following up on Block and Wolf's points regarding the delicate relationship between brokers and the groups upon which they exercise influence, Cornelius, another scholar of Latin American politics, writes:

Thus the cacique will strive continually to impress his followers with the range and importance of the contacts he has succeeded in establishing, depicting himself as enjoying the exclusive support and recognition of various high-ranking officials in the city and even federal governments and stressing the usefulness of such contacts in his negotiations on behalf of the settlement.³⁷³

Again, this highlights important aspects of brokers and their functions. Similar to these leaders of traditional rural and low-income urban areas of 20th century Latin America, brokers in Kochkor-Ata praised themselves in honour of their extensive connections to members of elite and even the country's Prime Minister. The ways in which these connections were put forward by local brokers makes it possible to understand that their connections (imagined or real) with central politicians were fundamental to brokers' status, as well as to their potential for exerting influence on peripheral protesters. Next to the importance of maintaining a balance between external and internal worlds, scholars also highlight the interests of brokers in the business of mediation. As Koster's analysis of brokers in Chão Favela in Brazil emphasizes,

Their connections to outsiders, I noticed, also offered them possibilities for gaining personal advantages that are critical for their survival, varying from monthly salaries to stipends for attending meetings and joining governmental programmes as well as other kinds of support, such as jobs, food aid or materials. These connections also add to their status vis-à-vis their fellow *favelados*; the community leaders frequently hinted at the range of their connections, their influence and the probable deals they would be

³⁷³ Cornelius, W. A. (1972) 'A structural analysis of urban caciquismo in Mexico', *Urban Anthropology*, vol. 1, no. 2, fall, pp. 234-261.

able to strike.³⁷⁴

As was shown in the empirical chapters, Kyrgyzstani brokers pursued similar gains, ranging from 'petty' interests such as private contracts and jobs with the mining company in the Aral case to hypothetical opportunities of cooptation in the Kochkor-Ata case. In many respects, Kyrgyzstani brokers are similar to the intermediaries of the different contexts depicted above. Yet next to seeking out particular interests, brokers are also expected to deliver a number of public services such as the provision of physical security in their settlement and/or the provision of state services, mediation before central authorities and others. None of these were achieved in either Aral village or Kochkor-Ata town. This point leads me to reconsider the mediating role of Kyrgyzstani brokers.

3.2. Kyrgyzstani brokers and the simulation of mediation

Against the background of Gould and Fernandez's ideal typology emerges a picture of a weakly institutionalized society, like that of Kyrgyzstan, in which brokers hold unstable positions and tend to combine many of these positions with the aim of accumulating benefits and/or navigating within an uncertain environment. In relation to mining operations, for example, brokers first served liaisons between the community and the miner. However, once relationships between the mining company and brokers deteriorated, brokers became representatives of a part of the community that resisted mining. To some extent, they also fulfilled a gatekeeping role, in the sense that they provided workers with information and expertise about mining, which was lacking in the village. Brokers also carried out coordination activities within their opposition group. However, residents suspected brokers of pursuing private interests and therefore not relinquishing their liaising role regarding the mining company.

With regard to the labour movement, the People's Defense Committee clearly positioned itself as a liaising actor between central actors and the local

³⁷⁴ Koster, M. (2014) 'Brazilian brokers, boundaries and buildings: A material culture of politics', *Journal of Material Culture*, vol. 19, no. 2, June, pp. 125-144.

constituency. However, since the head of the committee and its members were also salaried workers, other workers did not view their additional informal activities as completely impartial. Brokers also acted as representatives and coordinators of workers during private trips to the capital, as well as during protest actions, respectively. Yet during negotiations with central actors, their shift to a supposed impartial liaising position conflicted with their previous positions and therefore caused problems within the movement. By comparing the empirical chapters, I can conclude that these fluctuations of positions require high flexibility from a broker, but also imply the risk of gaining a reputation as a 'spoiler' (in Aral) or opportunist, who 'milks the cow' (in Kochkor-Ata). Therefore, whatever the reasons for brokers to occupy multiple positions, this strategy is short-sighted. Sally Merry, who investigated the role of brokers in diffusing international human rights, supports this finding when she insightfully notes:

Intermediaries are always suspect because they are not fully in one world or the other. Like the village headman in British Central Africa, they are vulnerable to accusations of disloyalty by either side.³⁷⁵

In both cases presented in this dissertation, there were 'structural holes' and multiple bridging possibilities that could have significantly enhanced the status of local brokers. Indeed, brokers appeared to have begun as leaders or as 'real' brokers, who connected aggrieved populations to central authorities; however, in the process of protest-making against a background of corrupt central politics, they failed to keep their positions integral. Brokers' fluctuating positions diminish – if not undermine – their influence over groups. Therefore, one can ask whether these brokers can indeed be viewed as such, or whether they are simply individuals who pretend to be intermediaries between different groups in order to advance their own private interests. It is therefore my position to view their role as effecting the simulation of mediation. Furthermore, these blurred positions and the convergence of private and collective interests lead ordinary participants

³⁷⁵ Merry, S. E. (2006) 'Transnational human rights and local activism: Mapping the middle', *American Anthropologist*, vol. 108, no. 1, March, pp. 38-51; For similar developments in Tajikistan see Heathershaw, J. (2012) 'The practical representation of peacebuilding: an (auto)ethnography of programme evaluation in Tajikistan', in Richmond, O. and Mitchell, A. (ed.) *Hybrid forms of peace: From everyday agency to post-liberalism*, Basingstoke: Palgrave.

and bystanders to be highly suspicious of any leader, because the latter tend too often to morph into brokers. However, my focus on opportunist activists within the two chosen mobilizations goes beyond the ambition of putting forward the role of specific social agents. When structure and agency are broken, what remains are social practices of simulation, which further erode any opportunity for a solid structure or genuine agency to emerge.

For the time being, brokers proliferate in current Kyrgyzstani settings. Given the development of this phenomenon, it would be timely to investigate the empirical and theoretical implications of brokers' simulation of mediation on protest entities. I will draw up a non-exhaustive list of consequences that to me seems most prominent.

First, by refusing to choose sides, these opportunist activists impede so-called 'operational closure' and leave the protest entity vulnerable to interventions of opponents.³⁷⁶ The process of interaction between a protest group and the opponent requires that each side takes clear positions for the sake of consolidating the conflictive relationship between them. We can therefore say that by informally shifting positions within the protest group, as well as between the protest group and the opponent, brokers impede operational closure and therefore, the structuration of mobilization *per se*. Second, by pursuing short-term goals, brokers erode the meaning of mediation and representation *per se*, since their impartiality as brokers – which fulfils specific functions – becomes questioned. Individuals will question every newcomer who will claim to represent public interests. Third, brokers' simulation leads to their own instability in the long run, because sooner or later, movement participants become aware of the distorted services provided by brokers. Finally, they corrupt the organization of mobilization and this way discredit the cause advanced by the organization altogether. As a result of distorted brokerage, instead of a facilitated flow of

³⁷⁶ I borrow the term 'operational closure' from conflict studies. See Messmer, H. (2007) 'Contradiction, conflict and borders', in Stetter S. (ed.) *Territorial conflict in world society: Modern systems theory, international relations and conflict studies*, London and New York: Routledge.

information and connectedness, the result is a distorted grievance message between a protest group and its opponent. Consequentially, the opponent and the wider public come to disbelieve the authenticity of protest messages and discarding the protest cause altogether. Once suspicion sets in, social mobilizations fail to serve as a democratic tool of social criticism. Moreover, widespread suspicion severely hampers social and political change. Thus, brokers are not simply one of many manipulative mechanisms of social mobilizations. They are instead symbols that at particular times serve as examples of the malfunctioning communications between society and the political system. Finally, the theoretical question – how do societal concerns and disagreements become structured and channelled in the presence of brokers – is one instance of a broader question about how change therefore occurs in a society characterized by multiple unmediated structural holes. I return to these issues in the concluding chapter.

IV. Sustainability of Social Practices of Contestation

Some significant points emerge from this comparative interpretation of empirical data. I have argued that the endurance of protest movements is subject to internal dynamics of movements. The comparison between two case studies demonstrates the extent to which local actors were capable of creating and maintaining their local (provisional or lasting) spaces, in which group processes proved decisive for the fate of mobilizations. Compared to traditional functions such as the construction of meaning, group processes also serve as means of internal monitoring and policing. In this way, a protest group, as well as the wider community in which the contention unfolds, can protect themselves from the destructive behaviour of opportunists. These processes therefore serve as safeguarding mechanisms and provide security. At the Kyrgyzstani periphery, initiators of resistance have a hard time lessening the effects of depoliticizing and discrediting practices of central politics and can only hope to do so by establishing some form of control over local practices. Therefore, group processes fulfil an important function through the policing of the behaviours of

others – a function that has developed into a dominant feature of current politics and social life in Kyrgyzstan.

Observations that are based on monitoring process lead either to the production or denial of trust. It is the varying results of these processes and mechanisms that conditioned the divergent outcomes of mobilization. In labour-based mobilization, workers succeeded in strengthening the union as the organization of the labour movement, whereas in community-based mobilization, participants showed distrust towards the organizers of the movement, which resulted in the demobilization of resistance. I believe these aspects of problematic group formation are shared by many grassroots mobilizations in Kyrgyzstan.

I have argued in my empirical chapters that these processes show protesters not as individuals who are influenced by members of the elite or guided by material benefits, but as highly reflexive beings. The ability of individuals to subject others' positions to lengthy scrutiny, to observe, suspect and distrust, is at odds with mainstream explanations of collective behaviour, e.g., elite manipulation. This point is also highlighted by Balihar Sanghera's timely critique of Central Asian scholarship, which tends to reduce human agency:

As human agents possess multiple properties and powers at the personal, individual and collective levels, emerging from the biological, mental and social properties of a corporeal body, the mind, social settings and social structures, it would be a mistake to reduce human agency and capabilities to the social (such as social roles, coordinates, networks or discourses), because this would deny our reflexive powers and our ability to comply, circumvent and resist natural and social structures.³⁷⁷

I hope that my accounts also contribute to the important attempt to reform our understanding of agency, which had previously been shaped by Central Asian scholarship. To continue in this direction, I argue that even with respect to the successful labour movement, structure and agency are fragmented in Kyrgyzstan. Protest structure is distorted, because for individuals and even for

³⁷⁷ Sanghera, B. (2013).

leaders to hold a stable position for a certain period of time (whether for or against a cause) is not a particularly affordable endeavour. Protest movements are therefore fragmented entities that rarely transform into enduring practices of contestation. This explains why in Kyrgyzstan, social and political protests emerge easily but find it difficult to sustain themselves over time.

The fragmented nature of protest movements can be tracked in the following observed features of mobilizations. The evasive structure of social mobilizations has implications for the ways in which they are perceived by opponents and the wider public. In the current Kyrgyzstani context, it can sometimes be difficult to understand who exactly is protesting. Is it ordinary citizens or local bosses, or youth thugs mobilized by elites that instigate disobedience? Whose concerns and grievances are represented? In other words, who are the leaders and members that constitute local mobilizations? Participants are themselves confused about the main actors involved and their goals, as was the case in Aral village, for example. The fuzziness of protesting agency is further deepened by the fact that protest grievances and concerns are not always comprehensible to the public. Messages regarding *naraazychylyk* (dissatisfaction/discontent) raise questions about whether participants are guided by material, parochial interests and power, or by the genuine anger caused by deprivation and domination. Lack of organizational resources adds significantly to this problem, since participants of peripheral movements cannot afford publicizing their actions in mass media and lobbying their cause within power institutions. Another major problem with the observed structure of protests is the methods employed by participants. On the one hand, they heavily criticize the current system of political relations but on the other, paradoxically, aspire to become part of it by offering themselves to cooptation. Their struggles against 'the system' therefore attract additional suspicion about the sincerity of their claims.

The non-intelligibility of protest claims is perhaps the biggest challenge for understanding local groups of resistance in Kyrgyzstan. In Aral, the anti-mining

resistance was not centred on themes that have become typical in the sphere of relationships between extractive firms and local communities. These themes usually include transgressions in terms of human rights, the environment, labour, social relations and others. In the Philippines, for example, indigenous groups have focused their struggle against foreign companies regarding the abuse of human rights.³⁷⁸ In different states of Africa, small-scale miners have been struggling to protect their right to extract gold in the absence of other sources of subsistence.³⁷⁹ In Aral, the resistance to mining by one group conflicted with the general level of poverty in rural Kyrgyzstan and in Aral in particular, and against the idea that a large-scale gold mining project would create jobs and an alternative income for the village. Members of households whom I interviewed and who had meagre livestock numbers and limited possibilities for exploiting land, expressed the desire to diversify their incomes and provide their children with opportunities for attaining modern professions and stop youth out-migration. Considering this example, residents of Orlovka village (Tchui Province, Northern Kyrgyzstan) were more receptive to a mining project in the Taldy-Bulak Levoberejny mine. Residents of this village viewed extraction as having the potential for economic revival within their formerly industrial village.³⁸⁰ In Aral, the case study demonstrates that genuine concerns can be exploited and consequently discredited by the corrupt organization and as a result, lose their mobilizing potential. Yet the discrediting machine works the other way around, too, where the discrediting of opposition leads to the depoliticization of the environmental cause altogether.

In the Kochkor-Ata case study, the workers' movement was not an entirely traditional labour struggle. On the surface, this case of Kyrgyzstani workers did

³⁷⁸ Coumans, C. (2010) 'Alternative accountability mechanisms and mining: The problems of effective impunity, human rights, and agency', *Canadian Journal of Development Studies / Revue canadienne d'études du développement*, vol. 30, nos.1-2, pp. 27-48.

³⁷⁹ Spiegel, S. J. (2014) 'Legacies of a nationwide crackdown in Zimbabwe: Operation Chikorokoza Chapera in gold mining communities', *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 52, no. 4, December, pp. 541-570.

³⁸⁰ Interview with Jonathon Hornbrook, the Head of the Resource for Development Program, GIZ, Bishkek, May 2015.

not differ from other instances of labour dissent against managerial corruption in Russia or China.³⁸¹ Indeed, in a country that shifted abruptly from social welfare to neoliberalism, such resistance by workers can be labelled a fight against neoliberal corrupt regime. This case study could celebrate the manifestation of a new social actor from within the Left, if workers did not merge with their managers and the political party with a dubious reputation. In addition, the implication of a political party suggests the existence of strong clientele-centred ties between the party and the labour movement and questions the autonomy of the later. Yet, the engagement of Kyrgyzstani workers in the fight against corrupt elites, which lasted for years, cannot be fully understood without understanding that politics is a precondition for thinking about the proper conditions for labour.

I have shown so far the difficulty in describing the phenomenon of social protests in Kyrgyzstan. The intellectual problem in analysing this situation lies therefore in trying to comprehend the nature of politics that inadvertently compromises the formulation of societal grievances and precludes group formation. I will attempt to provide directions for thinking about this question by linking protest-making to current political conditions in the next and final chapter of my thesis.

³⁸¹ Chen, F. (2000), 'Subsistence crises, managerial corruption and labour protests in China', *The China Journal*, vol. 44, July, pp. 41-63; Ashwin, S. (2000) 'Redefining the collective: Russian mineworkers in transition', in Burawoy, M. and Verdery, K. (ed.) *Uncertain transition: Ethnographies of change in the postsocialist world*, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.

CHAPTER VII: CONCLUSION

I. Introduction

This thesis explored social mobilizations in the Kyrgyzstani periphery in the context of post-revolutionary uncertainties. Contrary to elite manipulation and top-down approaches that have been dominant in Central Asian studies, my empirical cases have shown that grassroots mobilizations began as reactions to changes at the centre, but developed against the background of highly complex local politics. In Chapter II, I overviewed major theories that account for the emergence and sustainability of social movements and mobilizations. In Chapter

III, I furthered the theoretical discussion by explaining my preference for the 'recent social construction of protest' approaches (Hirsch, 1990). I conceptualized the formation of trust in group processes and developed a case methodology on the basis of ethnographic fieldwork. I argued that in the context of generalized social distrust and the proliferation of discredited images of protests, successful social mobilizations hinged upon internal dynamics of trust formation. In Chapters IV and Chapter V, I explored two contentious sites located in Kochkor-Ata town and Aral village, and uncovered the dynamics behind two examples of mobilization, one successful and one unsuccessful. The successful case of mobilization concerned a work collective of a state owned company that engaged against central elites along the local union and the company's management. The failed case of mobilization involved a group of rural residents who resisted a foreign mining firm through ambiguous environmental conflict. Finally, in Chapter VI, I provided an additional comparative interpretation of my empirical findings. I highlighted the critical role of group processes in the generation of trust as a necessary pre-condition for successful grassroots mobilizations and the destructive role of brokers that work to fragment collective action.

Drawing on insights from the recent social construction of protests approach, my ambition was to explain the fascinating features of current contentious politics in Kyrgyzstan. Specifically, based on my initial observations, I was intrigued by so many protests emerging on various topics of concerns from almost all areas of country and the little consolidation success among these fragmented voices into larger movements. Here, the social construction of protests as a decentred process-oriented approach proves very useful, in that it finds clues to successful mobilization in action and group dynamics. Eric Hirsch (1990) and Rick Fantasia (1988) paid specific attention to actual episodes of mobilization and group processes as moments and sites in which movement participants are most likely to develop solidarity bonds, as well as belief in the success of collective action. I employed Hirsch's concept of group processes as 'sites' in which I located important individual and collective processes that led to the sustainability or

disintegration of mobilizations in the Kyrgyzstani context. In settings that were characterized by weak institutions and weak organizational resources, the focus on group processes yielded particular value in terms of discovering the dynamics behind fragmented social mobilizations.

My research concerning the difficulties of the self-organization of citizens for the purpose of collective resistance contributes to the theoretical discussion of protest movements in weakly institutionalized societies in general and in Central Asia in particular. Broadly speaking, there are two research areas to which the current study addresses its conceptual, empirical and methodological findings. First, my work adds to social movement literature, as I investigate difficult environments characterized by high volatility and social contingency. It is in such environments where I researched unlikely opportunities for forming lasting, i.e., structured mobilization, by following the dynamics of group processes. My insights help to advance our understanding of what to expect from and how to approach protest episodes and movements at the world's periphery.

Second, my dissertation adds a new body of empirical knowledge to our understanding of mobilizations in Kyrgyzstan. Shedding light on issues pertaining to the formation of resistance, I offer new insights into the state of politics. What do we learn about Kyrgyzstani politics beyond patronage systems, elite-driven mobilizations and semi-authoritarian regimes? I claim that politics in Kyrgyzstan are distinguished by high levels of elusive, amorphous and fluid processes that defy our attempts to conceptualize them as solid social structures and given points of departures for our analytical endeavours. What is more, to date, most scholarship has focused solely on central politics as the locus for political and social developments. Few research projects, however, have considered the political dynamics in the periphery, with the exception of recent work completed by selected authors. My analysis of local sites of autonomy and dissent also offers a nuanced perspective on the relationship between the centre and periphery. Not only does the locale distinguish itself with specific dynamics of

mobilization, but such dynamics are themselves embedded within complex relations with the centre and are, reciprocally, shaped by them. The analysis of these relationships reveals even more about our understanding of the state and society nexus. Against attractive assumptions about a weak state and strong society, I not only portray the fragmentation of the state in Kyrgyzstan, but I also suggest that such a weak state, paradoxically, contributes to the production of a weak society.

I will begin by considering the contribution of my thesis to the literature of social movements and mobilizations in the first part, then move to discussing the literature of state and politics and its application to the case of Central Asia and Kyrgyzstan in the second part of the chapter.

II. Contributions to the Literature on Social Movements and Mobilizations

The following part of the chapter is divided into three sections. In the first section, I will discuss the role of trust in building social mobilizations. Against the general idea that trust is a given resource 'up for grabs', I claim that in corrupt post-Soviet societies, trust has been eroded and must be generated for any effort aiming to create large mobilization beyond a core group of believers. Following this insight, I will turn to the functioning of group processes in the second section. Here, I defer from the existing approaches in two ways: first, unlike the traditional reading, I claim that group processes do not only create internal resources but most importantly, function in a monitoring capacity. Second, group processes can produce opposite outcomes, because monitoring may lead to the success or failure of subsequent mobilizations. Finally, in the third section, I will elaborate on the dynamics of brokerage. Where current approaches focus on the free-riding problem within collective action to highlight the risk of passive benefit seekers, I distinguish brokers in Kyrgyzstan as active producers of opportunities.

2.1. Trust

In my thesis, I have shown that trust is a rare resource in the context of Kyrgyzstani society. It almost goes without saying that Kyrgyzstan has long been experiencing economic stagnation and a significant decrease in public goods. Distrusting politics, as well as the state and its various institutions have been the predicament of many regimes, authoritarian or not.³⁸² However, contrary to our expectations, these structural factors do not necessarily translate into drivers for social mobilization. In the following, I will integrate this peculiar moment of Kyrgyzstani social mobilizations into the wider debate on trust and social capital.

From the wider social capital literature, one can draw the conclusion that interpersonal trust is a product of social relations within a given organization. Referring to my findings, I challenge this conclusion and contend that it is not a product of social relations *per se*, but of the *constant verification* of these social relations. Let me broaden the perspective on the debate first. For Coleman (1988), social capital as a resource that is available to individuals depends on social organizations, whether clandestine South Korean student networks or the wholesale diamond market held by American Jews in Brooklyn, which he describes in his work. Coleman applies the workings of social capital in social settings such as markets, family or friend networks. He also provides a variety of resources that constitute social capital: information, norms and the trustworthiness of the social environment (which allows for the proliferation of obligations and expectations).³⁸³ Applying his insights to the context of Kyrgyzstan, Coleman's approach turns out to be less useful, however, for the analysis of social mobilizations that do not yet represent social structures, but the nascent collectivity of individuals in motion. His overly structuralist conceptualization of social capital explains individuals that come together to act collectively based on already existing forms of trust. I argue, however, that this

³⁸² Sztopka, P. (1999) *Trust: A sociological theory*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Mishler, W. and Rose, R. (1997) 'Trust, distrust and skepticism: Popular evaluations of civil and political institutions in post-communist societies', *Journal of Politics*, vol. 59, no. 2, May, pp. 418-51.

³⁸³ Coleman, J. S. (1988) 'Social capital in the creation of human capital', *The American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 94, January, pp. 95-120.

approach is too static to be applied to cases where individuals run up against existing distrust.

Furthermore, the existing literature aims to show how this capital is being mobilized and the outcome that is eventually created by such mobilization. Yet few have made an effort to present an adequate demonstration of how capital is 'engendered' in the first place. For example, for Bourdieu, an explanation seems to rest on 'the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition.'³⁸⁴ Fukuyama follows this understanding regarding the capacity of networks of relationships when he writes that 'social capital can be defined simply as the existence of a certain set of informal values or norms shared among members of a group that permit cooperation among them.'³⁸⁵ Finally, Putnam refers to social capital as 'features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit.'³⁸⁶ Again, at first glance, my two Kyrgyzstani cases appear to fit this vision. Both Aral village and the Kyrgyzneftegaz company can be identified as places embedded within communal networks, either based on kinship and descent or workplace identities. Yet as my subsequent analyses of mobilization efforts clearly demonstrated, such a conclusion is premature. Similar to Coleman's case, these interpretations of social capital are instrumental if our aim is to problematize the construction of trust in social settings that work against any sustained collective action.

The question of social trust as a resource of social capital has been further advanced in two directions: the rational choice and traditional society paradigms. Rational theorists have promoted the idea that in societies based on rationality,

³⁸⁴ Bourdieu, P. (1985) 'The forms of capital', in Richardson J. G. (ed.) *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education*, New York: Greenwood, p. 248.

³⁸⁵ Fukuyama, F. (1997) 'Social capital and the modern capitalist economy: creating a high trust workplace', *Stern Business Magazine*, vol. 4, no. 1.

³⁸⁶ Putnam, R. D. (1995) 'Bowling alone: America's declining social capital', *Journal of democracy*, vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 65-78.

trust may be an archaic norm and can therefore be rendered unwarranted. Others have followed on logically, stating that for the opposite case of traditional societies, trust can be easily found in the social fabric made up of family ties, kinship, clans and religious networks. I claim here that both directions underestimate the destructive effects of post-Soviet transformation on the social fabric when applied to the case of Kyrgyzstan. Following my local groups in their attempts to mobilize, I discovered on the one hand the precarious conditions offered by a fragmented state such as amorphous central and local institutions and ambiguous political opportunity structures (see the following part of this chapter). Such amorphousness, which as a consequence also robs us off 'concrete' analytical tools, directly challenges the foundations of rational choice theory that explains why actors join or do not join collective action. On the other hand, this approach enables us to confront the fragile and contingent social bonds of community members and the many obstacles they face to make use of these bonds in order to create larger trust-based networks.

First, regarding the rational choice theory, the structure of incentives to which a movement's leadership may resort in order to keep existing membership and to attract new followers might not be sufficient for overcoming barriers created by an uncertain environment and generalized distrust. To the contrary of such claims, I follow the argument developed by Karine Clément in an intellectual inquiry similar to mine. Observing collective action practices in Russia, Clément contends that in 'the institutional context of such new democracies as Russia ...trust is a key condition not only for democratization but also for the re-composition of the society.'³⁸⁷ Following Piotr Sztompka (1999), Clément contends that trust is a gamble in that it 'requires a person 'to make bets',³⁸⁸ but it is a necessary condition for involvement in action, even more so in collective action.'³⁸⁹ I find Sztompka's conceptualization of trust and Clément's problematization of distrust in Russian context very useful for understanding mobilizations in the Kyrgyzstani

³⁸⁷ Clément, K. (2008).

³⁸⁸ Sztompka, P. (1999), p. 69.

³⁸⁹ Clément, K. (2008).

context. These insights explain how individuals ‘gamble’ when they initially show an interest in joining a protest despite the presence of uncertainties, because they view it as a game, a show (Kyrgyz: *oyun*) in which they make bets whether a protest will be effective or not. Yet in subsequent stages, as it can clearly be seen from my empirical examples, they often withdraw from mobilizations if they fail to establish confidence in protest objectives and leaders.

Turning to the second claim regarding ‘traditional’ social bonds, I propose at this point a preliminary critique that the assumption about their facilitating effect lacks substantial empirical evidence (see the following part of this chapter). To argue that the assumption about ‘those embedded in a broader environment of trust, whether of familial or religious network, find that communal trust can be carried into other spheres’³⁹⁰ follows a line of reasoning that has been criticized for its inadequate import from African to Central Asian contexts, among others (Rasuly-Paleczek, 2005, 2006). This notion is a false departure from the idea that trust can be easily discovered and transported. Quite the opposite appears to be true when achieving and maintaining trust becomes the order of the day, as explicated by my empirical cases in Kochkor-Ata and Aral.

To conclude the debate concerning social capital and trust, I have found that much in the current literature is inefficient for accounting for trust in both traditional societies (Kyrgyzstan included), in which trust is believed to be inherent to the social fabric and equally in ‘advanced’ societies, where trust is taken for granted due to the presence of vibrant associations based on professional or other networks. The differences involved concern among others specific features of Kyrgyzstani society, namely the high level of atomization and the corresponding social distrust towards individuals and political organizations, as well as the weakness of mechanisms of social integration and the informal character of networks. It is also due to the specific character of Kyrgyzstani politics, especially the high centralization of power in the capital, corruption and

³⁹⁰ Collins, K. (2006), p. 28.

what Wolters (2015) has called ‘mimicry politics’, all of which has demobilizing and discrediting effects on collective action.

Before turning to some of these contextual factors in the next part of chapter, I would like highlighting the problem of trust construction in the following section. This discussion begins with the following question: what conditions allow local initiators of mobilization to achieve their desired goals via public contestation? I have argued that in the context of generalized distrust and discredited politics, the condition that allows for this transformation is the basic production of trust in the leadership and the cause. This production takes place in the form of specific *group processes*.

2.2. Group processes

At the start of this chapter, I stressed that group processes in the Kyrgyzstani context are less about the production of protests and more about the capacity for creating the necessary trust that contributes to collective action. The realization of this capacity arises from *monitoring*, a process by which future members observe, check and formulate opinions about the worthiness of participating in mobilizations. Only via the deployment of heavy and repressive techniques for observing and to monitoring can participants eventually gain confidence in the leadership and their proposed cause. Monitoring is the principal function of group processes. Other functions include actual episodes of mobilization, i.e., acting together, collective meaning-making and collective decision-making. Again, as an outcome of these processes, participants gain certitude in other members’ commitment and a belief in the success of collective action. Thus, the possibilities for scrutinizing social relations through real actions and in association with others are decisive for the success of any mobilization towards common goals. Yet, monitoring can also lead to the failure to convince others and therefore, to the failure of constructing mobilization.

This depiction of the creation of social trust as the contingent outcome of group

processes was my response to overtly static accounts of the formation of internal cognitive resources which, supposedly, automatically enabled social mobilizations. In my approach, I relied largely on the valuable proposition made by Eric Hirsch (1990), i.e., to look for the formation of the commitment needed for collective action in dynamic (group) processes. Hirsch conceptualized his formation of commitment in group processes among Columbia University students, New York City, in a context that differs significantly from Kyrgyzstani settings. In Hirsch's study, students did not mistrust each other or the leadership, but created 'situations' in which ideological commitment to the cause could be increased, thus providing conditions for lasting mobilization.

In my preliminary empirical observations, I recognized significant support for Hirsch's constructivist approach when I saw how local initiators of resistance tried to create open spaces as a way for raising awareness about ongoing events, interpreting meanings, sharing injustice frames and convincing the local audience to take part in mobilizations. One difference emerged, however, against Hirsch's formulation. Individuals who participated in these open spaces came with pre-defined suspicions about the initiators and their proposed ideas. Thus, the major task for organizers of open spaces became foremost to convince a suspicious audience by proving their consistent commitment to collective interests, i.e., their authenticity. Therefore, the initial participation in mobilization seemed to not have been oriented against an external threat *per se*, but directed at internal policing. In other words, initial participation in mobilization is intended, inadvertently, to establish repeated conditions that allow participants to monitor the behaviour of initiators and others in real time. From this conclusion, I adjusted Hirsch's concept in two ways. I proposed the primary function of group processes in Kyrgyzstan to be monitoring as a precondition for the production of trust and stressed as a result of this, a high level of contingency regarding outcomes stemming from group processes. The monitoring of others' behaviour can lead to both the formation of trust and opportunities for lasting mobilizations, or alternatively, the reinforcement of initial suspicions and the disintegration of the

initial mobilization.

Conceptualized this way, my understanding of social mobilizations contributes to the existing literature in one significant way. I argue that in the context of volatile corrupt politics and institutional uncertainty, social mobilizations work not only as political projects aimed at challenging the external environment, but most importantly, as political projects aimed at producing a local political community from a suspicious audience. Such a double task involves many more thresholds than anticipated by the existing literature that initiators of collective action have to overcome in order to achieve their goals. First, they have to meet the conditions required to successfully deal with external opponents and that have been elaborated by such theories and concepts as frame alignment, political process and political opportunity structure, among others. Second, they have to create conditions in which initiators of collective action are ready to lend themselves to continuous scrutiny and therefore, run the ongoing risk that such scrutiny can endlessly create internal conflicts, in turn adding to the already cumbersome task of maintaining group integrity. This tremendously increases the cost of the sustainability of mobilization. It is my hope that my conceptualization of social mobilizations can contribute to a better understanding of the collective endeavours that take place in non-Western contexts marked by authoritarian or colonial legacies, in the absence of institutions that can voice societal concerns and for the use of grassroots organizations, which can demand satisfaction regarding societal issues.

To conclude this section concerning the salience of group processes in the construction of social mobilizations, I would like to add an important point on methodology. The focus on group processes inevitably exposes a world filled with contingencies, dynamics and events that do not fully make sense. Such group dynamics put forward discrepancies on the ground and follows many instances of social fragmentation that neither structuralist and rationalist approaches nor theories of informal politics have shown an ability to deal with. As

social scientists, we therefore have to be methodologically prepared for facing the volatility of 'real' life. My case studies clearly demonstrate that in Kyrgyzstan, we can no longer take analytical categories such as identities, resources, networks, grievances and power as automatically translating into the world under analysis. The local actors that I observed were unable to readily rely on common values, shared norms, communal trust, or various sources of identity and power. This inevitably poses the question of *how* to proceed in rural Kyrgyzstan.³⁹¹ How can we make sense of fragmented processes in the periphery outside of electoral cycles, development aid and processes of 'outsourcing' societal concerns like the outmigration? My emphasis on group processes assists in linking the seemingly 'meaningless' political life at the periphery to the dynamics of social and political change. I go after the situations in which 'things' may or may not happen. These include resident gatherings, worker trips to the capital and ordinary meetings that at times unexpectedly morphed into something bigger. However, in many cases, these situations lead nowhere. We nonetheless must not discard these incidents as meaningless events in a chain of precedent failures. Furthermore, we have to be prepared to account for outcomes that are difficult to predict. Group processes appear to be a good method for tracing events, for capturing internal dynamics and to account for change (whether successful or failed collective action). I believe this methodological approach can better render the complexities on the ground so as to better account for the general dynamics of socio-political development in Central Asia.

In the final section, I want to provide with a great manifestation of the above-mentioned contingencies and with the complexities of the ground. In addition, this manifestation connects once again to our difficulty for accounting for the agency

³⁹¹ Alexander Wolters and Svetlana Jacquesson made important attempts to grasp the complexities and contingencies of sociopolitical perceptions by introducing the issue of public opinion in their respective works on political conflicts and the reproduction of genealogies, respectively. Jacquesson (2012) highlights the growing awareness and knowledge of readers concerning newspapers and public media, and the changing context of genealogy production. Wolters (2012) contends that with different and progressively contradicting political claims, often from the same political actors, public opinion has not only been unable to question political positions, but has completely lost its capacity to structure political events and therefore, to provide political actors with meaningful orientation.

of contentious politics. With this I will turn to my final point, i.e., 'brokerage' and its role in social mobilizations in Kyrgyzstan.

2.3. Brokerage

The rational choice theory within social movement literature has long underlined problems pertaining to free-riding in collective action. My study of brokers contributes to this topic in two meaningful ways. First, it expands our understanding of the nature of contingent agency in collective action. Here, I highlight that participants not only risk experiencing the free-riding dilemma (Olson, 1965) but also to engage in active opportunism. Second, my study of 'brokers' contributes an additional perspective on the micro-dynamics of collective action. By situating themselves in the middle of social positions, brokers produce blurred categories pertaining to leadership, membership and organizational structure.

In 1965, Mancur Olson introduced the important issue of actors' rationality and the free-riding dilemma in the context of collective action. Olson linked this dilemma to group features and suggested that free-riding is likely to occur in large groups. The subsequent literature dealing with collective action arose in reaction to Olson's innovation in two ways. The first thread of literature developed on Olson's proposal by suggesting different solutions to the dilemma of free-riding in the format of increased control and additional incentives within groups. The second thread of literature criticizes rational choice theory based on different arguments.³⁹² Although I do not agree with the foundations of rational choice theory, I find Olson's point useful for once again highlighting the problematic agency of collective action. My study of brokers differs from Olson's rational actor in two ways. First, I find that Kyrgyzstani brokers do not act as passive seekers of benefits but actively engage into the production of opportunities. Second,

³⁹² Rational choice theory overlooks the fact that actors are 'socially embedded with loyalties, obligations, and identities that reframe the issues of potential support for collective action'. See, for example, Morris, A. and Mueller, C. (ed.) (1992) *Frontiers in social movement theory*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

brokers' opportunism is less a result of Olson's organizational qualities and more a product of developments in society and politics in Kyrgyzstan.

The first insight refers to the puzzle that in my two cases about the Kyrgyzstani mobilizations, each participant of collective action could potentially have become a broker. I reasoned that for these participants, brokerage consisted of 'doing business in the middle', i.e., between the parties of contention, whether it concerned mediation between the central government and local constituencies, or mediation between rural residents and the mining company. These individuals sought various benefits from their location in the middle: from informal deals to financial remuneration, from access to employment to increased social status. They worked hard to create local structures of opportunities for themselves based on societal grievances and concerns. Yet irrespective of this, their calculation for benefits and investment remained incredibly risky, because these opportunities were always hypothetical and elusive. Thus, in contrast to Olson's low risk free-riders, agents of collective action in the Kyrgyzstani context engaged into personal high-risk enterprises.

With regard to the second point and Olson's explanation of free-riding as an organizational outcome, I stress that brokerage is a political phenomenon. Independent of group size and organizational specificities, presently, brokers emerge and proliferate in almost all spheres of human activity in Kyrgyzstan. Brokerage is a product of corrupt politics, institutional uncertainty and a volatile environment. The proliferation of brokerage questions existing assumptions about traditional societies in which 'norms and social pressure from peers and elders within the clan guard against opportunism.'³⁹³ Therefore, Olson's, as well as other rational choice scholars' solutions to free-riding such as increased control, attractive incentives for members and the management of group composition are less likely to remedy issues of brokerage in Kyrgyzstan. In this case, politics bears much larger implications for micro-dynamics of collective

³⁹³ Collins, K. (2006), p. 30.

action than it does in the West.

I now wish to address the final question in relation to brokerage, i.e., its effect on the micro-dynamics of collective action. Since abilities for observing and checking on one another exist within local sites of mobilization, the opportunistic strategies of brokers become visible to others. In my empirical cases, I showed to which extent the observation of brokerage produces distrust among other participants. As a result, any genuine leader will face suspicions, regardless of whether they are a broker seeking private interests or not. Similarly, leadership will also remain uncertain, regardless of whether members keep their commitment to collective interests or turn into a broker at any given moment of contentious politics. Such dynamics impede the structuration of collective action. My study of problematic agency further echoes other post-Soviet scholarship on social mobilizations. The discrediting of movement leaders is a prominent problem in other hybrid regimes. For example, in the case of Russia, Clément formulates the problem in the following terms: ‘activists and other citizens not under control are seen as *provocateurs*, and the only accepted kind of collective action is that which is set up and run by the bureaucracy [my emphasis].’³⁹⁴ Clément’s point makes sense, since the Russian state has much more resources than any other social group to control for the cohesiveness and efficacy of mobilizations in a top-down manner. In the case of Kyrgyzstan, resources are much more dispersed and are specifically lacking at the grassroots level and therefore, do not prevent the proliferation of brokers.

III. Theoretical and Empirical Implications of the Dissertation for the Study of Society, Politics and the State

My research into fragmented social mobilizations within a weakly institutionalized state contributes to a wider range of topics beyond social movement literature. The findings of this dissertation can be linked to ongoing debates on political processes and political structures, and may be of interest to researchers of post-

³⁹⁴ Clément, K. (2008).

communist societies. I identified two broad intellectual fields on which my study sheds additional light: the study of weak/failed states and the analysis of informal institutions. I will conclude my contribution to this body of scientific inquiry by reflecting on the possibilities for social and political change in Kyrgyzstan that these peripheral mobilizations can potentially generate.

3.1. Weak state – weak society?

Social mobilizations in Kyrgyzstan have shown various struggles between different social groups, which provide new insights into processes of social and political change in the country. In particular, I have demonstrated how central rules and regulations are accommodated or defied within far corners of the society. In this section, I will discuss my findings in light of the state/society nexus (Migdal, 1988) and propose that in Kyrgyzstan, we not only have a ‘weak state’ but also a ‘weak society’.

Various Central Asian scholars have focused on or implied the role of the state through a prism of societal conflicts and tensions, whether they involve state borders (Reeves, 2014; Megoran, 2007), Islamic revival (McGlinchey, 2009), civil war (Heathershaw, 2009, 2011), clan competition (Schatz 2004; Collins, 2006), competition among regional elites (Jones-Luong 2002; Markowitz, 2013), or clientele-focused relations (Radnitz, 2010; Engvall, 2014), to name a few. In most of these accounts the Central Asian states appear as ‘failed’ (Markowitz, 2013; McGlinchey, 2009), or ‘stable outside, fragile inside’ (Kavalski, 2010), or again ‘dispersed’ (Jones Luong, 2004).

In the Kyrgyzstani context, economic crisis and political instability attracted similar assessments. Eric McGlinchey, for example, identified the state’s failure in terms of its incapacity to provide ‘basic public goods’.³⁹⁵ Lawrence Markowitz’s research on the Tajikistani state and its periphery can be rightly extended to the

³⁹⁵ McGlinchey, E. (2009) ‘Islamic revivalism and state failure in Kyrgyzstan’, *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 56, no. 3, pp. 16-28.

Kyrgyzstani context when he notes: 'weak states by definition have a very limited governing presence in peripheral areas, where systems of authority are notoriously diffuse and difficult to control. The periphery of weak states, then, is fertile ground for the beginning of state failure.'³⁹⁶ This dominant approach towards perceived state weakness in Central Asia has focused on elites and their instrumentalized clientele. For example, Scott Radnitz and Pauline Jones Luong examined how contentious national elites and 'local strongmen' developed within and outside of the regime, leaving the state fragmented and curtailed in terms of its powers (Radnitz, 2005, 2010; Jones Luong, 2004). In general, capturing of the state by corrupt elites can be identified as a common problem in post-Soviet regions, Africa (Bayart, Ellis and Hibou, 1999) and Asia (Gupta, 1995). In addition, repeated overthrows of government by the elite and regional social groups inevitably pose questions, if not about the capacity of the state, at least about specific political regimes. Suggesting the weakness of the political regime, a Russian political observer noted in 2005: 'the events that took place in Kyrgyzstan [2005 revolution] show explicitly that neither ideology nor extensive masses or a distinguished leadership are needed to topple...power.'³⁹⁷

In support of weak state advocates, my two case studies also demonstrated the limited extent of state organizational 'expansion' into the periphery. State institutions that deal with central policies and programmes in the extractive industry were missing or malfunctioning. Additionally, the Kyrgyzstani state has developed a rather ambiguous attitude towards social mobilizations in this growing economic field. For example, in an interview with the Head of the Analytical Department of the Ministry of Interior in Bishkek (department #10) about the nature of popular protests, I was given rather inconclusive answers. I was told that there were basically two types of protests. According to the interviewee's typology, protests were organized either by those who aspired to

³⁹⁶ Markowitz, L.P. (2013) *State erosion: Unlootable resources and unruly elites in Central Asia*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, p. 3.

³⁹⁷ Afanasieva, E. (2005) 'Obyknovennaia revoliuciia' [An ordinary revolution] in *Kyrgyzsky perevorot, Mart-April 2005* [The Kyrgyz overthrow, March-April 2005], Moscow: Evropa.

power or by those who were let go from positions of power (*kyzmatka kirish je kyzmattan ketish*). Furthermore, he showed a lack of interest for any detailed investigations of such cases. When asked whether the Ministry of Interior conducted systematic observations of protests, he referred to '*konfliktnye ochagi*' (conflict hotbeds), which included sites of ethnic and religious tensions.³⁹⁸ His interest in hotbeds rather than 'manipulated' protests was clearly due to the degree of the perceived 'seriousness' of the former and their role within the current 'discourse of danger'.

Another state official, the Head of the Special Mineral Resources Department of the Ministry of Economy, was interviewed about the ways in which the state dealt with conflicts in the mining industry. His response was that 'communities would calm themselves down with time.' To be clear: in public discourses, these and other government officials claimed that the government had carried out all the necessary measures to facilitate the relationships between foreign miners and rural communities. Such measures typically included the liberalization of national legislation, the transparent regulation of licenses, conducting information campaigns among the population, etc. However, to my insisting remark that most communities lacked the institutional capacity to deal with complex mining issues and that they entered into conflicts with miners because of their risk perceptions, which result from the weakness of the law, this government official bluntly replied that the state does not have the resources to send him and his team to localities to carry out basic responsibilities.³⁹⁹ In the context of scarce resources, the state adopted a 'wait and see' attitude, until foreign firms were able to establish a common language with local communities on their own. These opinions demonstrate on the one hand the simplified interpretation of protests and on the other, the lack of state policy in extractive industries. Such examples show what little transformation takes place in the Kyrgyzstani state as the result of pressure

³⁹⁸ Interview with the Head of Analytical Department of the Ministry of Interior, Bishkek, September 2012.

³⁹⁹ Interview with the Head of Special Mineral Resources Department of the Ministry of Economy, Bishkek, September 2012.

enforced by popular movements, which contrasts their democratizing effects on institutions in the West.

Although one may find it difficult to disagree with observations about state weaknesses, an awareness of its limited explanatory power is nonetheless warranted. As John Heathershaw pointed out in the case of Tajikistan: 'state weakness seemed self-evident but this concept did not explain the survival and strengthening of the Tajikistani state after the early civil-war period.'⁴⁰⁰ Heathershaw raised the important question of why, despite its weakness, the state nevertheless persists in this part of the world. Following this intellectual inquiry, Doolotkeldieva and Heathershaw explored the 'pervasiveness of statehood' in the context of state mediation within extractive conflicts in Kyrgyzstan⁴⁰¹ and found that both national and foreign actors keep soliciting the state, despite its poor performance regarding the provision of security and formal regulations on the ground. This intriguing evidence also found support in my empirical cases. In Aral village, the state was sought out as a mediator of conflicts between a foreign miner and the rural community, and in Kochkor-Ata town, the state was lobbied to 'tame' unruly elites that had been trying to establish rents at the state company.

I further showed how actors at the periphery not only perceived state weakness, but also how they interacted with a fragmented state. Using different examples, I demonstrated the ways in which actors experienced their quest for the locus of power within the Kyrgyzstani political system. I had lengthy discussions with local residents on the subject and was often identified as someone 'coming from the centre' and therefore, more knowledgeable about potential sources of power (*biyliktin butagy*). This search for power was not always successful for every resistance group. Such peripheral protesters were reminiscent of social scientists, who attempt in their intellectual endeavours to locate the centres of

⁴⁰⁰ Heathershaw, J. and Herzig, E. (2011) 'Introduction: the sources of statehood in Tajikistan', *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 30, no. 1, pp. 5-19.

⁴⁰¹ Doolot, A. and Heathershaw, J. (2015).

decision-making that bear potential for changing situations in remote localities. One can literally trace together with these peripheral actors not only the inner workings of the obscure Kyrgyzstani political system, but also the evolution of theoretical thought on the state. Like some of the more statist thinkers who have been conceptualizing the state as a special organization – a fulcrum of power that sits atop society – these peripheral protest groups journeyed to the capital, to the centre, with the hope of finding there an ‘ultimate’ source of authority. Their quest was brought to light in the letters that anti-mining activists directed to the highest representatives of power at the centre and workers’ stories regarding their travels to the capital, Bishkek. Yet, sources of power were not to be found in concrete institutions, or elites or bureaucracy. Power was diffused among intangible channels and state authority was fragmented. Workers realized that the state did not represent a ‘coherent, controlling organization’⁴⁰² that observed the implementation of law; additionally, there were other formations (elites, institutions and patronage networks) that competed with the state in the field of implementing rules and regulations.

This experience brings to the fore Joel Migdal’s dichotomy between the state’s ‘image’ and ‘practices’ *par excellence* (Migdal, 2004). Peripheral social groups came to witness *in situ* the ‘real’ functioning of the state. However, this learning experience also had real implications for their contentious politics. Protest groups that employ institutional channels such as petitions, complaints and the justice system must rely on formal rules and regulations. But what happens when they realize that these institutional channels are somewhat arbitrary and managed according to unknown rules of the game? At this point, many resistance groups that lacked information, knowledge and established human and financial resources have to stop their quest to find the needed political support. Ignorance about the central rules of the game adds more reasons for peripheral actors to be confused, overwhelmed and misguided by external events and hence, take their

402 Migdal, J. S. (2004) *State in society: Studying how states and societies transform and constitute one another*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.16

bifurcated, provisional or amateurish styles of collective action seriously. This was the case among anti-mining activists in Aral, who failed to convince regional and central authorities to back their environmental and nationalist causes.

Groups that decide to use informal channels and play according to the obscure rules of the game must be prepared to bear high costs in terms of the generation of political connections, financial capital, time and emotional solidity. The labour movement was one such rare examples of persistent engagement with the 'unresponsive' state. Here, I note that once the worker delegations discovered the multiple sources of authority in the capital, they began acting not 'towards' the state, but in parallel to those elites and institutions that were perceived as substituting state functions. In competing with corrupt elites and institutions, these peripheral groups exploited state weakness to their benefit by protracting local conflicts against central policies. One of the outcomes of such successful sustained engagement with the state is the successful transformation of the dichotomy between the ideal image of the state and its corrupt practices into a strong source of contention for societal groups. The title of the labour movement, 'for truth', explains the long journey the workers undertook to understand where truth, i.e., answers to their demands, was located. In Russia, similar citizen groups 'against state deception' (*protiv proizvola*) have emerged during the past decade. Thus, instead of a predicted growing 'separation' between state and society, which according to Madeleine Reeves is an analytical (or heuristic) distinction,⁴⁰³ the state appears to be a place of constant contention and tension that brings together various groups. Here, Migdal's model of 'state in society' is helpful for understanding that the state, even when weak, is in a constant process of reproduction within society.

In previous scholarly work within Central Asian studies, various authors have illustrated how different parts of society worked for or against the state. Although these accounts have shed a great deal of light on problems of statehood in this

⁴⁰³ Reeves, M. (2014a), p.11.

part of the world, less has been conceived of societies themselves. My research moves beyond this limitation and addresses the condition of society itself. The question that now arises is how do we characterize society in such a fragmented state? What effects does a fragmented state produce on the various parts of society, especially in its remote corners?

Previous studies have suggested that Central Asian societies rested on local 'strongmen' who have been able to defy the state's authority on the totality of its territory and therefore, more or less conclusively, implied the presence of a strong society. Based on the findings of my empirical data, I propose that a weak state can result not only in a strong society, but of a weak society, too.⁴⁰⁴ While examining the fragmented and provisional nature of social mobilizations, I could not help but notice that these characteristics were the result of features of other parties that were part of the conflict. Whereas the main parties of conflicts were the foreign firm on the one hand and corrupt elites on the other, the third and omnipresent actor was the state. The state featured in these conflicts at different stages as mediator, an indirect opponent and a source of political support. Most importantly, the state provided a general political, institutional, regulatory and judicial background against which the conflicts between opponents and local groups have been unfolding. One difference was noticeable between the two local arenas; in the case of Kochkor-Ata, the state was more 'responsive' to the demands of the local group due to the involvement of the justice system and central institutions within the conflict. In contrast, in Aral, the state was perceived as 'unresponsive' to the demands of the local resistance group because firstly, it delegated responsibility to the disempowered regional administration and secondly, it left the conflict to the sole discretion of the mining company and the community.

⁴⁰⁴ John Heathershaw makes a similar argument, claiming that rebellions against the state are caused by the state. See Heathershaw, J. (2015) 'Rebels without a cause? Authoritarian Conflict Management in Tajikistan, 2008-15', *European Society of Central Asia Studies*, 8-11 October 2015, University of Zurich.

These interactions between local groups of resistance and the state can reveal aspects about the additional role 'the other' plays in the dynamics leading to the success or failure of social mobilizations. To shed light on the role of reciprocity as it concerns these dynamics, I drew on conflict studies and specifically, on Messmer's conflict theory. Heinz Messmer suggests observing conflicts as distinct systems whose formation, or so-called 'closure', as self-generating entities, depends on sequences of interactions between opponents. These sequences eventually imply that each opponent takes a position regarding the initial communication of rejection of the other and responds to this rejection by further rejection. Only when these interactions are sustained can we begin to consider the formation of distinct conflict. This approach highlights the salience of interactions between opponents as a source for the internal reproduction of conflict. It therefore suggests that proper conflict is based on mutual reciprocity and therefore cannot sustain itself if only one party supports the conflict.⁴⁰⁵ When transported to the field of social mobilization, this reciprocity underlines the importance of a strong opponent, i.e., a strong interlocutor, against whom grievances can be shaped and demands can be formulated. Moreover, with Messmer, we are able to learn about the relevance of the opportunity to actually engage with the opponent, to communicate with it and to 'practice' the conflict. If the opponent is amorphous and unresponsive, contentious activities will not have much room for further development.

In my two case studies, the state to which the peripheral protesters referred to (in its triple quality as opponent, supportive party and mediator) behaved ambiguously in the creation of conflict. By taking an elusive position in the interactions between local groups and their opponents, which can be read as neither assent nor rejection, the state produced an incredibly demobilizing effect upon protest groups. Against the background of a fragmented state, protesters have a difficult time to achieve their desired results and therefore, to sustain their activities. Thus, state deception serves as a source for sustained engagement

⁴⁰⁵ Messmer, H. (2007).

only to a minority of social and political groups; for the majority of society it instead bears a powerful demobilizing effect. If in other post-communist societies it is the authoritarian state that impedes the unification of individuals for political action,⁴⁰⁶ in Kyrgyzstan, it is – quite paradoxically – the weakness of the state. In Kyrgyzstan, the state does not openly work against the emancipation of its citizens, since its apparatus is too weak for such a task. Yet, the unresponsiveness (neither assent nor rejection) of state institutions to societal demands, the corruption of courts and the inability of political organizations to mediate conflicts demobilize citizens' self-organization, without this necessarily being the intention of the state. In other words, my resistance groups in Aral and Kochkor-Ata had no centre to resist against. I therefore view the fragmented state in Kyrgyzstan as partially accountable for fragmented social mobilizations.

3.2. Uncertain politics and patronage networks

My work provides further insights to a second debate on the specific forms of politics in the region. In the preceding research agenda that dominated the early discovery of independent Central Asia, the fixation on the formation of new institutions at the centre (various types of authoritarianism and their surrogates⁴⁰⁷) had led to a partial failure for detecting developments unfolding in the regions. Subsequently, this caused some surprise regarding the unforeseen existence of revolutionary 'hotbeds' located at the periphery. At the other end of the spectrum, our fascination with informal institutions has led to exaggerating

⁴⁰⁶ McGlinchey, E. (2013).

⁴⁰⁷ For Central Asia, some scholars have suggested introducing the concept of neopatrimonialism, as based on Weber's typology. For this group of literature, see: Ilhamov, A. (2007) 'Neopatrimonialism, interest groups and patronage networks: the impasses of the governance system in Uzbekistan', *Central Asia Survey*, vol. 26, no. 1, pp. 65-84; Ishiyama, K. (2006) 'Neopatrimonialism and the prospects for democratization in the Central Asian republics', in Cummings, S. N. (ed.) *Power and change in Central Asia*, New York and London: Routledge; Laruelle, M. (2012) 'Discussing neopatrimonialism and patronal presidentialism in the Central Asian context', *Demokratizatsiya*, vol. 20, no. 4, pp. 301-324; Lewis, D. (2012) 'Understanding the authoritarian state: neopatrimonialism in Central Asia', *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, vol. 19, no. 1, pp. 115-126. For the discussion of authoritarianism: Cummings, S. N. (2012); Hale, H. E. (2005); Hale, H. E. (2006) 'Democracy or autocracy on the march? The coloured revolutions as normal dynamics of patronal presidentialism', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, vol. 39, no. 3, September, pp. 305-329; Melvin, N. J. (2004) 'Authoritarian pathways in Central Asia: A comparison of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic and Uzbekistan', in Ro'i, Y. (ed.) *Democracy and pluralism in Muslim Eurasia*, London: Frank Cass.

conclusions about the relevance of tribe/clan/regional identities as alternative mobilizing platforms in the face of failing formal organizations. In this section, I employ my empirical material to suggest that patronage politics has to date been theorized according to static models and as a consequence, has evolved into a rigid and over-determined concept. I argue that the uncertain political environment of the immediate post-revolutionary period in Kyrgyzstan (2010-2015)⁴⁰⁸ has had an impact not only on grassroots mobilizations, but also on the dominant form of politics – patronage. Based on my empirical observations, I discuss the nature of post-revolutionary politics between the centre and periphery and its implications for collective action, as well as the relevance and power of informal institutions.

The most prevalent conceptualization of politics in Central Asia has to date been patronage politics. Scholars have highlighted various resources of patronage such as tribalism (Esenova, 1998; Temirkulov 2004), clan politics (Collins 2002, 2006; Schatz, 2004), territoriality (Radnitz, 2005, 2010), kinship (Ismailbekova, 2014) and regional identities (Jones Luong, 2002).⁴⁰⁹ Azamat Temirkulov and Altyn Kapalova state,

In 20 years Kyrgyzstan was basically “embedded” in patronage networks in which people support their patron in exchange for...access to resources.⁴¹⁰

There is the expectation that patronage relationships work either on a vertical axis, such as in Kazakhstan, where loyalty to the hierarchy is maintained from the top all the way down (Isaacs, 2011), or they work on a horizontal axis among elites, as is the case in Kyrgyzstan (Radnitz, 2010). Scott Radnitz has thus far provided the most detailed account of patron-client relationships in rural Kyrgyzstan. In his analysis of the Tulip Revolution, he advances the thesis of

⁴⁰⁸ It can be argued that the second parliamentary elections held on 4 October 2015, after the introduction of a semi-parliamentary system in 2010, led to less uncertainty, because of the victory of the pro-presidential SDPK party and the gradual consolidation of presidential power.

⁴⁰⁹ For a critique of these approaches, see: Gullette, D. (2010) ‘The problems of the ‘clan’ politics model of Central Asian statehood: a call for alternative pathways for research’, in Kavalski, E. (ed.) *Stable outside, fragile inside? Post-Soviet statehood in Central Asia*, Farnham: Ashgate.

⁴¹⁰ Temirkulov, A. and Kapalova, A. (2014).

strong localism and employs the original concept of *subversive clientelism* to explain the relationship of dependence between rural communities and autonomous (non-regime) elites in the post-independence years. Subversive clientelism has developed as a result of the 'shrinking' welfare state and the failure to provide the countryside with public goods. The reliance of rural communities on elites (vertical ties) provides the latter with support bases that can be mobilized against the regime in coordination with other independent elites (horizontal ties). Radnitz further explains the success of overthrowing the regime in 2005 through the activation of these horizontal and vertical ties.⁴¹¹

Radnitz' thesis is convincing in regard to elite strategies of contestation of regime and the existence of patronage networks in the country. As Cummings points out: 'few can deny the importance of patronage networks for sustaining social, political and economic life and for mobilization.'⁴¹² However, as a result of my empirical study, I claim that Radnitz' argument provides a somewhat static explanation of patronage networks between local communities and elites. I believe we need a more dynamic model to account for the incapacity of patronage in order to remain immune to the fragmentation of the state. Such an approach needs to take into account the contingency of patronage relationships and the rising cost of the efforts required to maintain them, both at the vertical and horizontal levels. Second, Radnitz' account ends up portraying local collectives as lacking voices on their own and as mere recipients of these elite strategies.⁴¹³ This shifts our attention away from complex issues of self-organization and the intricate politics of grassroots actors. In general, by reducing the complexities of the organizational and cognitive realities of social life, clan/tribe/geographical static accounts of patronage risk giving us only a partial answer to the dilemma of collective action within weakly institutionalized societies. Furthermore, these approaches inadvertently cause depoliticized

411 Radnitz, S. (2010).

412 Cummings, S. N. (2012), p. 71.

⁴¹³ For critiques of Scott Radnitz, see also Megoran, N., Heathershaw, J., Doolotkeldieva, A., Reeves, M., Cummings S. and Radnitz, S. (2013).

interpretations of politics. Madeleine Reeves takes an important step in this direction by presenting a research agenda that re-politicizes so-called 'resource' conflicts (Reeves, 2014). In the same vein, Amanda Wooden brings back individual environmental philosophies to explain environmental mobilizations against the 'elite manipulation' thesis (Wooden, 2013). Elmira Satybaldieva makes an attempt to 're-politicize' Kyrgyzstani local politics by introducing the rural poor as a political actor (Satybaldieva, 2015).

My study continues along this line of argument by emphasizing the contentious politics of the working classes and rural communities that cannot be reduced to the elite manipulation thesis. I argue that although the effect of patronage as a form of current political competition and mobilization is valid, its scope is over-determined. For that, members of the peripheral groups that I studied for four years expressed uncertainty and mixed feelings about patronage politics at the centre and in vicinity. I illustrated how workers launched multiple attempts at finding patrons in the centre to back up their cause. For this purpose they organized several delegations to the capital, met with high-ranked government officials and lobbied in Parliament. Even their long-standing ally, the Ata-Meken party, showed limits of efficiency of patronage. No patron was readily at hand in these times of uncertainty, and neither horizontal nor vertical ties offered enough potential for coping with the challenge of lobbying peripheral concerns at the centre. In my Aral case study, I indicated the limitations of clan/tribe/geographical solidarities in the organization of anti-mining resistance. That a rural community fails to be provided with stable social and family networks stands in sharp contrast to existing theoretical assumptions about Kyrgyzstani rural communities. In fact, the experience of uncertainty had repercussions for the very ability of resistance groups to make sense of central and local arenas and therefore, to act politically. In the next section, I reflect further on how uncertainty affected the rebels' perceptions of patronage politics, as well as their efforts to activate it for their own purposes.

In general, in the case of Kyrgyzstan, uncertainty⁴¹⁴ about the post-revolutionary period had confusing implications for local sites of resistance: at the initial stage, the contingency related to the openness of the new parliamentary system allowed actors to act and approach 'the system'; however, later, the same contingency inhibited them from acting. In the immediate post-revolutionary period, uncertainty sent signals about the unlikelihood of the use of repression against protesters. Furthermore, the openness of the political system was perceived as a central structure of opportunities to which peripheral groups could relate in order to become a part of it. Here, vertical and horizontal patronage networks may partially endure in answer to growing uncertainties about old and new centres of power. However, patronage practices changed according to lessons learned regarding the new (dis-) functional parliamentary system. In the intermediary run, uncertainty about 'whose rules rule' complicated the access to power holders. Furthermore, as my research shows, protesters did not fully know how to relate to their opponents (whether foreign miners or corrupt elites), due to quickly changing configurations of power relations at the centre, a lack of information and routinized knowledge and experience in public contestation. Prior to the April Revolution, it was clear that large foreign firms and central elites were protected by the regime. The current uncertain environment served as fertile ground for the proliferation of intermediaries, i.e., the brokers noted in my case

⁴¹⁴ The most prevalent conceptualization of uncertainty in political science is that of incomplete information in various fields of the economy, law, politics and corresponding institutions, and its effects on actors' behaviour. This concept has become especially popular among scholars of democratization and regime studies. Drawing on this vast literature, which I cannot discuss due to space restrictions, it can be argued that uncertainty can be viewed as a product of multiple distinct and parallel processes. Thus, it can act as an accompanying feature of the transition from authoritarianism towards new democracy. See O'Donnell, G. and Schmitter, P. (1986) *Transitions from authoritarian rule: Tentative conclusions about uncertain democracies*, Baltimore, Md.; London: John Hopkins University Press. It is also judged as a stable element of electoral outcomes in democracies (see Schedler, A. (2001) 'Taking uncertainty seriously: The blurred boundaries of democratic transition and consolidation', *Democratization*, vol. 8, no. 4, pp. 1-22) and can be viewed as a legacy of previous colonial politics, as well as an outcome of competition between formal and informal institutions (Helmke, G. and Levitsky, S. (2004) 'Informal institutions and comparative politics: A research agenda', *Perspective on Politics*, vol. 2, no. 4, December, pp. 725-740). In regard to developing democracies, uncertainty arises specifically from the disjuncture between competing incentives stemming from formal and informal institutions and takes the form of confusion among individuals and collective actors about the rules that govern political interactions (see O'Donnell, G. and Schmitter, P. (1986)).

studies, which profited from societal concerns and grievances to advance their particular interests.

One further manifestation of uncertainty that increases the cost of mobilization among local protesters is the fact that Kyrgyzstani politics is also affected by a specific authoritarian legacy in the form of 'mimicry politics' (Wolters, 2015). Proliferation of mimicry politics and pervasive corruption plays an important role in the formation of negative public opinion about protest movements. For grassroots movements, it becomes extremely difficult to sustain internal cohesion against generalized external distrust. Moreover, public recognition of grassroots leaders quickly becomes limited to militant groups at the local level and as a result, attracting new members across other social spheres and regions is almost impossible. Another outcome of this changing political culture is the current proliferation of 'paid' mobilizations. I link this phenomenon to a lack of secure 'mobilization structures', if such structures ever existed. Here, a lack of or fragmentation among 'genuine' (or traditional) clientelism is replaced by the possibility of paying protesters. If elites nowadays have to pay individuals to stage mobilizations in their support, it may indicate limitations to patronage relationships and the predominance of mimicry politics.

Another useful approach for connecting the impact of uncertainty on protesters is to employ Debra Javeline's concept of 'blame attribution' in post-Soviet Russia (2009). Javeline explains that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian citizens struggled to make sense of complex national events that were from then on irrevocably intertwined with global processes. The blame attribution difficulty can explain the passivity of Russian workers. This is an interesting explanation, as it attempts to focus attention on the situation of ordinary citizens whose individual and collective actions are hindered by a lack of information, of nuanced knowledge concerning their rights and of orientation in national and global affairs. Wooden (2013) found that 'the more consistently and specifically people attribute blame to government for local environmental problems, the more likely they are

to protest about the environment.’ Javeline’s concept is particularly helpful in demonstrating that protesters have a difficult time formulating their demands, because of their limited access to information and knowledge. Individuals may sense that they are being dispossessed of something, but find it difficult to articulate their breached rights in coherent terms and to build up wider social support.

My empirical material showed that although Kyrgyzstani protesters were puzzled by obscure central politics, the blame attribution dilemma did not stop them from engaging in contentious activities at the initial stage. Yet, the blame attribution dilemma increased the costs of mobilization, e.g. making private travels to the capital, engaging in negotiations with elites and giving rise to the intervention of opportunist intermediaries. Therefore, if the dilemma does not prevent initial episodes of mobilization, it has implications for the subsequent course of mobilization by diminishing the opportunities of peripheral protesters who lack organizational resources. Differences in organizational capacity explain why the blame attribution dilemma had been decisive in disadvantaging communal resistance, but not the labour movement. All of these observations provide a picture of an unstable system in which the opportunities for patronage relationships to emerge and be maintained are continuously challenged by increasing levels of contingency.

3.3. Local politics and change

In thinking about social mobilizations and their effects on politics, this dissertation also addresses broader questions regarding social and political change that are of interest to students of political science and the post-Soviet region. Drawing on my empirical material, I will engage in a final round of reflection about the connection between fragmented social mobilizations and effecting change in specific localities. This is a continuation of the above discussion concerning central politics and the ways in which it is both reproduced and countered at the local level. The reproduction of central politics took place in the form of local

groups being power-oriented and seeking cooptation from central patrons. However, resistance also developed by privileging democratic consensus-building and collective decision-making in open spaces. It will be interesting to see what types of change we can expect from these different types of contentious politics.

I start this discussion by stressing one more time that the grassroots mobilizations I observed do not fit into clear-cut analytical categories that we, as social scientists, may sometimes conceptualize in order to reduce complexities on the ground (Wolford, 2010). Thus, in one case study, mobilization was connected with local politics regarding the distribution of gold resources. Specifically, local actors did not vie for control over resources *per se* (the gold project was in the study stage) but for control over access to informal deals offered prior to the revolution by the foreign mining company. Organizers of the anti-mining contention employed environmental damage as a means for framing their resistance, both in negotiations with the miner and the central government and in their attempts to convince fellow residents. Although the environmental theme may have represented genuine concerns of residents who were preoccupied with the future of their lands and income – in line with the insights produced by Wooden (2013) – it eventually became an ambiguous cover of petty struggles for power. Similarly, in the second case study, the labour movement emerged as a response to rent seeking and the corruption of central elites. However, labour's expansive and lengthy engagement with central politics is ambiguous, taking into account the merge between workers, the trade union and the company's management. Thus, these examples of grassroots mobilizations do not represent cases of clear struggles for 'conservation' or against 'dispossession' in Latin American and Asian mining sites, or of 'rightful resistance' in China,⁴¹⁵ or fully 'environmentally-driven' or clearly labour issues.

⁴¹⁵ O'Brien, K. and Lianjiang, L. (2006) *Rightful resistance in rural China*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

In each of my cases, along 'ideological' topics (labour and environment), local actors were preoccupied with and involved in politics. For example, they challenged existing structures of power, which made them appear less authentic to the public than if they had, for example, demanded pure labour or environmental concessions. This is related to the ways in which the spheres of politics and the political are perceived. According to my case studies about protests in the Kyrgyzstani provinces, it appears that in order to understand social and political change, one has to consider this amalgamate of societal concerns and politics together. From the perspectives of these local sites of resistance, only the 'political' can provide hope for achieving a victory that will enable individuals to set up conditions that will be conducive to the satisfaction of more 'conventional' labour and environmental demands in the long-run. Hence, at this stage of our analysis, extended engagement in political clashes can be interpreted as a precondition for later-stage policy contests.

What type of change, then, can be expected if grassroots movements become involved in current forms of politics and are at least partly power-oriented? In the case of Russia, Clément suggests that protest movements reproduce features of the central power model at the bottom.⁴¹⁶ The reproduction of the central power model, according to Clément, takes place in two formats: the adoption by individuals of patron-client relationships or a retreat of individuals to the private sphere. In Kyrgyzstan, similar tendencies can be observed regarding the general level: individuals adopted the central model by making themselves available to cooptation and simulating central power games,⁴¹⁷ or opted for hidden resistance.⁴¹⁸ Yet, my case studies also revealed other strategies and tactics that

⁴¹⁶ Clément, K. (2008).

⁴¹⁷ Here I want to underline how the simulation of the power model in the locale reproduces cooptation and therefore conditions the political culture. Instead of arguing that Central Asians' obedience to authority is rooted in their 'culture' or 'tradition' (Anderson, 1997) I demonstrate how a new dynamic results out of processes of observation and emulation of the behaviour of central elites and the dominant power model. Conceptualizing political culture as a dynamic process, it becomes then possible to argue that patriarchy and loyalty to authority (Gleason, 1997) are not 'imprinted' in local traditions but are heavily subjected to and prone to constant change and transformation.

⁴¹⁸ On hidden resistance see Satybaldieva, E. (2015).

differed from the above-mentioned emulation and exit options. In both contentious sites, there were attempts to form resistance based on public discussions via open village gatherings and regular all-workers meetings. Organizers of mobilization have also attempted to formalize their contentious politics by creating organizations of resistance (such as growing unionization and local cultural association). In the case of the labour movement, participants went as far as establishing democratic mechanisms of collective decision-making and consensus-building. Even in Aral, other incentives (such as the temptation to play political games) and norms (such as kin and *uruu* obligations) did not assist in avoiding public discussions as the core aspect for collective action. These aspects of local contentious politics run contrary to assumptions about Kyrgyzstani society, specifically, the prevalence of informal politics over open politics (Temirkulov and Kapalova, 2014; Commercio, 2010).

These elements (emulation and resistance) provide a rather diversified picture about the types of social and political change these grassroots movements imply, both for local and central politics. They clearly highlight endurance, as well as the contingency of patronage on the one hand and a growing necessity for open and formal politics on the other. The latter happens precisely because participants of contestation realize that without organizational resources and social trust, which can be gained only in open and collective processes, it is impossible to withstand the fragmented state and the unresponsive central government within the public sphere. This double effect can perhaps be framed in what Sally Cummings termed mobilization 'within and without the system' (Cummings, 2012). I leave this intriguing point of convergence/divergence between informal and formal, and between central and local politics for future research.

A final note regarding the role and function of social mobilizations. If it does not concern traditional loyalties and integrated networks and if it does not address the disruption of existing orders (the Western logic of protests), then what exactly is the function of protests in the provinces in Kyrgyzstan? To respond to this

intriguing question, I begin with a quote that was repeated like a mantra by one of the participants of the labour movement and that eloquently captures the purpose of protests:

Blocking the roads and storming the state institutions is a last option for us. You see, laws don't work and formal complaints and official letters are inefficient. Only by staging strikes can we make sure to grab the attention of authorities. It's politics [*sayasaf*]...in the past, workers weren't able to do politics.⁴¹⁹

The above statement puts questions concerning outcomes and the prospected achievements of these local struggles, at the centre of the discussion. If one understands the meaning of politics as striving for power, as it is practiced in Kyrgyzstan, one might come to a pessimistic conclusion about social protests as movements that move towards gaining political resources. However, there is more to the above statement about that workers learnt 'to do politics'. It will be premature to dismiss this claim as a naïve reference to a newly gained ability among workers to penetrate political structures and to become a weighty political force. Instead, this phrase alludes to the wider understanding of politics as providing access to the public, as creating a space and place where governmental decisions are subject to revisions and bargaining, and where workers gain more power simply by means of increased participation. The above statement thus refers to a newly developed political consciousness that contrasts the limits of a fragmented neo-liberal state.

To many critical thinkers, social movements in the West are the result of fundamental changes within social structures (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). For Castells, a social movement is a form of 'purposive collective actions whose outcome, in victory as in defeat, transforms the values and institutions of society.'⁴²⁰ For Melucci, a social movement is 'a form of collective action (a) based on solidarity, (b) carrying on a conflict, (c) breaking the limits of the system

⁴¹⁹ Interview with the Head of the People's Defense Committee, Kochkor-Ata, November 2012.

⁴²⁰ Castells, M. (2004) *The Power of Identity*, 2nd edition, Oxford and Malden: Blackwell, p. 3.

in which action occurs.’⁴²¹ These conceptualizations suggest in one way or another a break with the existing system and the aspiration for significant change in cultural, institutional, political and even economic settings. They present a clear critique of dominant structures and ideologies, and highlight the existence of suppressed voices and marginalized groups in modern society. However, Kyrgyzstani grassroots mobilizations that go against existing economic and political orders while lacking knowledge and information, do not engage in the generation of a genuine political project (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Collective meaning-making and consciousness-raising occur in *retrospective* and not before or even during collective action. In the case of an uncertain environment, the depoliticizing and discrediting practices of the central political system create an atmosphere in which actors adopt short-term strategies and visions, where they can rarely sustain commitment to initial goals. Instead, to ‘do politics’ and to ‘go against’ is the manifestation of attempts to create opportunities for conflict in the first place.

The question that follows is whether or not these localized sites of resistance can transform into nation-wide movements and provoke widespread change. As already noted, micro milieus are able to give rise to specific issues and may even be successful in defending them. Yet, is it possible for fragmented protest movements that represent localized leftist critiques of current neo-liberal policies to go beyond the ‘clique’ style? (Clément, 2015). In the case of Russia, Robertson suggests that the parochial nature of protest demands ‘inhibited the scaling up of protests into a broader movement.’⁴²² With the exception of teacher strikes against low wages from 2010 to 2011 across Kyrgyzstani regions, localized sites of resistance have thus far not offered a medium in which wider positions can be formed that would speak to broader collectives. This is true not only for grassroots activism, but also for political parties and interest organizations. These findings question the possibility of protest emulation that

⁴²¹ Melucci, A. (1985) ‘The symbolic challenge of contemporary movements’, *Social Research*, vol. 52, no. 4, winter, pp. 789-815.

⁴²² Robertson, G. (2010), p. 59.

have been famously conceptualized by Beissinger (2007) during the ‘coloured revolutions’.⁴²³ Social distrust of politics and collective organizations currently precludes any opportunities for a local movement to gain followers from other regions. From this perspective, the likely potential for cross-cutting geographical isolation amid social distrust appears to be similar to Radnitz’ account of elite situational cross-regional cooperation (2010). Yet as can be deduced from my case studies, even such cross-regional cooperation will be challenging if each new bond needs to be subjected to new rounds of reciprocal observation and monitoring. Generalized distrust and the inability to build lasting cross-regional alliances also explain why social mobilizations currently remain parochial. Most likely, we can expect to observe social change in small groups, as well as the transformation of selected local arenas. Kochkor-Ata certainly serves as an interesting example in this context.

In this part of the chapter, I attempted to extend my theoretical and empirical findings to ongoing debates concerning state and politics. Local actors perceive and interact with the state despite its failures to mediate local conflicts and to pay attention to societal concerns. Furthermore, the weak state has had a demobilizing effect on local groups of resistance. With regard to existing scholarship on patronage, I argued that existing concepts of patron-client relationships are too static and do not reflect the contingent nature of patronage. In the end, the changing nature of patronage has less to do with ‘cultural predispositions’ and more with historical legacy and in particular, political uncertainty. Finally, I reflected on the type of social and political changes that fragmented social mobilizations can induce within Kyrgyzstani society and in conclusion, presented the obstacles that wider mobilization inevitably has to face in this society.

In summary, my thesis observed mobilizations within the extractive industry. I did

⁴²³ For a well-structured critique of Beissinger’s emulation model see Heathershaw, J. (2009) ‘Rethinking the International Diffusion of Coloured Revolutions: The Power of Representation in Kyrgyzstan’, *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, vol. 25, nos. 2-3, pp. 297-323.

not follow established theories about labour mobilization or resource nationalism. In exploring the labour movement, I did not link high protest rates with labour strength and I overlooked specific indicators such as unionization rates, decrease in wages, unemployment rates, corporate institutions and individual 'exit' options developed in countries with informal economies,⁴²⁴ among others.⁴²⁵ These theories have been used in comparative and quantitative studies to explain the weaknesses (or relative strengths) of labour. In the investigation of anti-mining mobilization, I also overlooked the following explanations that have been popular in environmental/extractive studies. I did not systematically consider traditional links between the unequal consumption of scarce resources and violent conflicts,⁴²⁶ between political instability and violent conflict or between the absence of effective systems for mediating impending conflicts and violence.⁴²⁷ To some extent, a focus on quantitative indicators and the use of the above-discussed theories was impossible, due to the existing structure of data in Kyrgyzstan. I hope that more can be done to further establish this type of knowledge about the growing extractive industry field in Kyrgyzstan and that more comparative research can be drawn from in future.

⁴²⁴ Hirschman, A. (1970) *Exit, voice and loyalty: Responses to decline in firms, organizations, and states*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

⁴²⁵ Kelly, J. (1998) *Rethinking industrial relations: Mobilization, collectivism and long waves*, London: Routledge. On economic theories of strikes see Kennan, J. (1986) 'The economics of strikes', in Ashtenfelter O. and Layard, R. (ed.) *Handbook of Labor Economics*, Amsterdam: Elsevier Science, vol. 2, pp. 1091-137; Soskice, D. (1978) 'Strike waves and wage explosions, 1968-1970: An economic interpretation', in Crouch C. and Pizzorno, A. (ed.) *The resurgence of class conflict in Western Europe since 1968*, New York: Holmes and Meier.

⁴²⁶ Collier, P. (2000) *Economic causes of civil conflict and their implications for policy*, Washington, DC: The World Bank; de Soysa, I. (2000) 'The resource curse: Are civil wars driven by rapacity or paucity?', in Berdal, M. and Malone, D. (ed.) *Greed and grievance: Economic agendas and civil wars*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.

⁴²⁷ Hauge, W. and Ellingsen, T. (2001) 'Causal pathways to conflict', in Diehl, P. and Gleditsch, N. (ed.) *Environmental conflict*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press; Hirsch, P. and Warren, C. (ed.) (1998) *The politics of environment in Southeast Asia: Resources and resistance*, London: Routledge; Homer-Dixon, T. (1999) *Environmental scarcity and violence*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; Ballard, C. and Banks, G. (2003) 'Resource wars: The anthropology of mining', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 32, no. 1, pp. 287-313.

Glossary

akim - head of district

aksakaldar sotu – court of elders

aktcii mitingov or **protestnie aktcii** – Russ. generic term to designate protest actions

ayaldar keneshy - women's council

ayil kenesh - village council

ayil okmotu - village administration

bechara - backward people

bizge yntymak kerek! – we need peace

biylik – power

biyliktin butagy – source/foundation of power

buzukular - spoilers

chon sayasat - big politics

chondor – lit. 'big men'; elite

chyndyk uchun kyimyl - movement for truth

chynchyl jana turuktuu opposicia - genuine and stable opposition

dejurnie aktivisty – Russ. lit. 'activists on duty'; paid 'activists' or protesters

dejurny baldar – Russ. and Kyrg. lit. ‘boys on duty’; young males at someone’s service

dyikan charba - farmers’ unit

el uchun - in people’s interests

eldik jyin – people’s gathering

eldin ishin kyluu – doing the people’s job

eldik korgoo komiteti - people’s defense committee

fanat – Russ. fanatics

ishenich - trust

jalpy eldik chechim - all people’s decision

jaman attuu kyluu - ruining one’s reputation

jasalma - fake

jer uchun - for land

ketsin! - get out!

kirgizbeibiz! - we won’t let you in!

kopuroo - bridge

kollektiv – Russ. work collective

konfliktnye ochagi – Russ. conflict hotbeds

kurultay – public assembly

kvartal – Russ. village part

kyimyl – movement, to move

kyzmatka kirish je kyzmattan ketish – aspire for power or resign from power position

maseleni kotoruu – voicing one’s concerns

mej-etnicheskie mitingy – Russ. inter-ethnic protests

mitingy – Russ. generic term to designate protests and other forms of mobilization

naarazychylyk korsotuu – express grievances/discontent

nachalnik – Russ. boss

narodnoe pravlenie – Russ. people's management

neftyannik – Russ. oilman

obchestvenno-politicheskie mitingy – Russ. 'public-political' protests

OBON – Russ. lit. 'women's unit of special mission'; group of females, manipulated or autonomous, using violent means of pressure to achieve social and political goals

ondurup aluu - squeezing benefits from someone or something

opposicioner – Russ. opposition

ortodo - in the middle

ortogo salyp ishtoo – lit. 'doing business in the middle'; being an intermediary

ozun uchun - in one's interests

prodajny activist – Russ. corrupt activists

protiv proizvola - Russ. against state or elite deception

rabochie gorodki – Russ. workers' settlements

revolutsialyk komitetter - revolutionary committees

sayasat – politics

sayasiy oyun - political game

sekiruu – lit. jumping; shifting sides, changing loyalty

socialno-ekonomicheskie i bytovye mitingy – Russ. 'socio-economic and daily routine' protests

Talas el yntymagy - unity of Talas people

talkuu jurguzuu - public discussion

torpedy – Russ. lit. ‘torpedoes’; young males used by elite for intimidation, simulation and other purposes

tuyu jok - no roots, no ground

uruu – descent line

vertikal vlasti – Russ. ‘vertical of power’; a hierarchical political relationship between political entities or between the regime and constituencies

vystuplenie radi vystuplenia – Russ. performance for the sake of performance

yzychuu kyluu – politicization, agitation, noise, mobilization

List of acronyms

CEO – Chief Executive Officer

GDP – Gross Domestic Product

GIZ - German Organization for Sustainable Development

ICT - Information and Communication Technologies

IRI – International Republican Institute

MENA - Middle East and North Africa

MI – Ministry of Interior

NGO – Nongovernmental Organization

OBON - Women’s Unit with Special Mission

OSCE – Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe

SDPK – Social-Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan

SMT - Social Movement Theory

SNB – National security services

POS - Political Opportunity Structure

PPT – Political Process Theory

SMO – Social Movement Organization

UPRW - Union for the Protection of Railway Workers

List of interviews

N	Date and place	Interviews
1	January 2014, Bishkek	Gulshair Abdirasulova, NGO 'Kylym-shamy'
2	September 2012, Bishkek	Head of Analytical Department of the Ministry of Interior
3	September 2012, Bishkek	Head of Mineral Resources Department of the Ministry of Economy
4	December 2011, Jalal-Abad	Former Mayor of Jalal-Abad city
5	December 2011, May 2013, December 2014, Jalal-Abad	Head of the local newspaper 'Aymak'
6	December 2011, Bishkek	MP Iskhak Pirmatov from the Respublica party, House of Parliament
7	December 2011, Bishkek	MP Gulasal Sadyrbaeva from the Ata-Meken party, House of Parliament
8	November 2011, May 2013, December 2014, Kohckor-Ata	Head of Kyrgyzneftegaz trade union, Akynbek Raimkulov
9	May 2013, December 2014, Kohckor-Ata	Member of Kyrgyzneftegaz trade union

10	November 2011, May 2013, Kochkor-Ata	Member #1 of local branch of Ata-Meken party
11	November 2011, May 2013, Kochkor-Ata	Member # 2 of local branch of Ata-Meken party
12	May 2013, Kochkor-Ata	Member of local branch of SDPK party
13	May 2013, Kochkor-Ata; September 2013, Bishkek	Member of Board of Directors of Kyrgyzneftegaz Company
14	May 2013, Kochkor-Ata; September 2013, Bishkek	Former Chair of Board of Directors of Kyrgyzneftegaz Company
15	December 2011, Kochkor-Ata	Employee # 1 of Kyrgyzneftegaz Company
16	December 2011, Kochkor-Ata	Employee # 2 of Kyrgyzneftegaz Company
17	December 2011, Kochkor-Ata	Employee # 3 of Kyrgyzneftegaz Company
18	December 2011, Kochkor-Ata	Employee # 4 of Kyrgyzneftegaz Company
19	December 2014, Kochkor-Ata	Brigadier of drilling team of Kyrgyzneftegaz Company
20	December 2014, Kochkor-Ata	Worker of drilling team of Kyrgyzneftegaz Company
21	December 2011, May 2013, Kochkor-Ata	Member of People's Defence Committee
22	December 2011, May 2013, Kochkor-Ata	Chair of People's Defence Committee, Ondurush Zamanov
23	December 2014, Kochkor-Ata	Head of kindergarten of Kyrgyzneftegaz Company
24	November 2014, Bishkek	Member of Board of Managers of Kyrgyzneftegaz Company
25	November 2011, May 2013, Kochkor-Ata	Female worker #1 of Kyrgyzneftegaz Company
26	November 2011, Kochkor-Ata	Female worker #2 of Kyrgyzneftegaz Company
27	December 2014, Kochkor-Ata	Head of Transport Department of Kyrgyzneftegaz Company
28	December 2014, Kochkor-Ata	Head of Gas Distribution Service
29	December 2014, Kochkor-Ata	Worker of Gas Distribution Service
30	November 2011, Kochkor-Ata	Worker #1 of Transport Department
31	November 2011, Kochkor-Ata	Worker #2 of Transport Department
32	August 2012, Aral	Participant #1 of a village gathering
33	August 2012, Aral	Participant #2 of a village gathering
34	August 2012, Aral	Participant #3 of a village gathering

35	August 2012, Aral	Participant #4 of a village gathering
36	August 2012, Aral	Participant #5 of a village gathering
37	November 2014, Aral	Participant #6 of a village gathering
38	November 2014, Aral; May 2015 and July 2015, Bishkek	Anti-mining 'activist' and Head of Beishe Ata association, Ortok Mambetaliev
39	August 2012, Aral; September 2012 and November 2014, Bishkek	Employee #1 of Talas Copper Gold
40	August 2012, Aral; September 2012, Bishkek	Employee #2 of Talas Copper Gold
41	August 2012, Aral; September 2012, Bishkek	Employee #3 of Talas Copper Gold
42	August 2012, Aral	Participant #1 of violent attack I
43	August 2012, Aral	Participant #2 of violent attack I
44	2013, Bishkek	Anonymous expert
45	November 2014, July 2015, Aral	Member #1 of women's council
46	November 2014, July 2015, Aral	Member #1 of women's council
47	November 2014, Aral	Member of <i>aksakal sotu</i>
48	August 2012, Aral	Member #1 of youth council
49	November 2014, July 2015, Aral	School teacher
50	November 2014, July 2015, Aral	Deputy director of school
51	September 2013, Bishkek	Representative of Andash Mining Company
52	September 2013, Bishkek	Representative of Talas Gold Mining Company
53	August 2012, Aral	Local police officer
54	2013, Bishkek	Former Country Manager of Talas Copper Gold, John Schloderer
55	July 2015, Talas	Former Head of Village Administration, Dokturbek Dosmanbet uluu
56	November 2014, Aral	Member #1 of local branch of Ata-Meken party
57	November 2014, Aral	Member #2 of local branch of Ata-Meken party
58	November 2014, Aral	Member of Aral commission
59	November 2014, Aral	Member #1 of Village Council
60	November 2014, Aral	Member #2 of Village Council
61	June 2015, Bishkek	Jonathon Hornbrook, Head of Mineral Resources for Development Programme, GIZ

62	November 2014, Aral	Female employee of Village Administration
63	August 2012, Bishkek	Country Director of Talas Copper Gold, David Grant
64	September 2013, Bishkek	Former Head of Village Council of Bekmoldo, an anti-mining 'activist', Bakyt Seitaliev
65	November 2014, Aral	Member of Beishe Ata association and anti-mining 'activist' and his wife

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